

## – INTRODUCTION –

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Harry Potter is the © property of:

JK Rowling, 1997

Bloomsbury Books, 1997

Warner Bros. 2001

Author's Note: Several aspects of the magical world are different in the fanfiction I write. The currency situation is one. As such, the currency valuation in any Seel'vor fanfiction will be as follows:

1 Knut 10 pence (0.20)

1 Sickle 2 pounds, 90 pence (5.80)

1 Galleon 49 pounds, 30 pence (98.60)

Non-consensual sexual relations will NOT happen in any Seel'vor fanfiction.

Any chapters or fictions that contain extreme violence or sexual conduct will be marked as such. If you are not of age to read such work, please do not do so. Please note, this work may contain swearing and other harsh language.

The concepts of 'Ancient and Noble' Houses is only briefly touched in canon, in Order of the Phoenix, where Sirius describes the House of Black. It is never accurately described in any detail, nor is the concept of 'Lords' being the heads of houses. As such, any references to Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of XXX is purely fanon.

Author's Note:

I've read a lot of Harry Potter fanfiction, and all seven of the books. During those books, I noted that Albus Dumbledore can always be interpreted as a manipulative man.

I, myself, have written fics where Dumbledore's good but manipulative and evil and manipulative, but I've never written a story where Dumbledore's a true hero, working tirelessly for Harry.

For chapter seven, I had to reread Deathly Hallows (under protest) and I was absolutely shocked at Dumbledore's conduct. Had I been Harry in the King's Cross afterlife, I would have killed Dumbledore again, making certain that his soul was destroyed. What Dumbledore did was truly unforgiveable, condoning child abuse and torture, all for some nebulous 'greater good'.

In "The Real Us", I decided to reinterpret several of the facts about Dumbledore. A number of questions have been raised about the contents of the books, such as:

- Why did Dumbledore never train Harry for the destiny he knew he'd have?
- Why did Dumbledore just drop a fifteen month old toddler, who was capable of crawling, possibly walking, away on the doorstep of 'the worst sort of Muggles imaginable' on a cold November evening? That action could have resulted in Harry's death before he ever got to Hogwarts.
- Where was the love and support he needed while growing up, considering that love was supposed to be 'the power the Dark Lord knows not'?
- Why didn't Remus Lupin contact Harry before third year? And where the bloody hell was he during fourth year?
- Why didn't Dumbledore look into the situation regarding Sirius more closely?

- How the hell did Voldemort wander around on the back of Quirrell's head for a year without being detected?
- Why didn't anyone notice a person using a Horcrux during Chamber of Secrets?
- How could Harry fall insanely in love with a girl who looks like his mother, shortly after they cover love potions? How could he fall in love in less than four weeks, too? Considering that it wasn't love at first sight (that would have been Philosopher's Stone) and no-one would notice if she wasn't at Hogwarts during POA and GOF, and only seemed to turn up towards the end of OoTP, where the hell did Super!Ginny come from?
- JK herself had stated that she would never end up with Ron. In fact, she's dated several Ron-type figures in the past, and her husband is like Harry... so why would she put the heroine with the (piss-poor) comic relief? They have NOTHING in common, but they're not diametric opposites. That one baffles me, it really does.

All of these, I thought, were good questions. I've tried to answer them, making Dumbledore into the Hero of the Light that he was supposed to be. I've also given Snape a positive role in Harry's life.

This is my work of fiction, and I've worked quite long and hard on this. I hope you enjoy it.

– PROLOGUE –

Unplottable Location, Somewhere in Britain  
Friday, 31st July, 1998

It was over. A saga which had been developing for 74 years, 5 months and eighteen days had finally come to a conclusion, to the relief of the entire magical world.

In an Unplottable house in Oxford, two people were partaking of a particularly fine array of breakfast foods. One of them, a young lady, was thoroughly engrossed with a heavy tome, reading out the occasional nugget of knowledge that would garner her companion's attention.

The young gentleman was occupied by a newspaper, flicking through the irrelevant articles, until he actually came across something newsworthy.

It was when he got to the fourth page that there was something worth reading. "Hermione?"

The young lady, Hermione, looked up. "What's up, Harry?"

Harry Potter, the 'Boy-Who-Lived', the 'Chosen One' and most recently, the 'Man-Who-Won', smiled at his companion. "There's an 'invitation' to me and you to go to Hogwarts tomorrow."

"Oh?" Hermione replied casually. "And why would we want to do that? Haven't we done enough recently?"

"That appears to be what it's about." Harry said, passing over the paper, so she could see what had got his attention. "According to this, there's a big press conference tomorrow, in which 'Harry Potter and Hermione Granger will reveal the full story of their thrilling defeat of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named!' Funny... I don't recall agreeing to that."

Hermione snorted. "Well, if we weren't under the heaviest set of wards in Britain, we might have heard something about it." She

quickly read through the article. "You're right, though. It really is arrogant presumption on their part. And look at this!" She pointed to the next page. "Percy Weasley's making an announcement about a series of new regulations that'll 'prevent this sort of atrocity happening again'."

Harry matched Hermione's snort. "Yeah, knowing Prickeval, that'll probably not be good for us. It's a good job we took care of things, isn't it?"

"Yeah... So, we're going?" She asked.

"We should, really." He paused. "You think we should invite your parents?"

Hermione shook her head. "Wanna leave them out of this."

"Okay... are you gonna finish that bacon?"

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Saturday, 1st August, 1998

Hogwarts had been the site of the Final Battle, people living, fighting, bleeding and dying in front of the bastion of light. It had been an all out war, death and destruction running rampant throughout the ancient stone walls. Now, sadness stalked the halls, infusing the air with it's stifling grip.

The Great Hall was packed with people. It had been scant days since the battle that had decided the fate of the free world had been fought, and only now were people beginning to realise the intense cost.

Of the survivors, the largest group were the Weasley family. Fortunately, the entire family had survived, although in one or two cases, that had been very close.

Fred Weasley had come within an inch of death, but quick action on the part of a certain 'Chosen One' had managed to stabilise him long

enough to send him to St. Mungo's. After two gripping nights of anticipation, he'd been pronounced stable. He was still on a dozen potions to aid his recovery, but he would live.

George Weasley had made it through the final battle, hale and hearty. With the exception of his missing ear, courtesy of Severus Snape almost a year ago, he'd not picked up a serious injury. He'd been out of his mind with concern over Fred, but when the Healers at St. Mungo's had declared that he would live, he'd grabbed the matron and kissed her passionately. Blushing like a bride, he'd been chased out of the hospital by the matron's irate husband.

Ron Weasley had done his duty and helped to defeat the evil Dark Lord. Now, he was looking forward to his rewards. There would be fame, money and girls aplenty, but best of all, he'd finally snag the girl he really wanted; Hermione Granger. He'd been patient long enough. Courtesy of Fred and George, the book *Twelve Fail Safe Ways to Charm Witches* had led him closer and closer to his goal, and Hermione, like an idiot, had swallowed every cheesy line and compliment. She would be his. Oh, yes... she would be his.

Ginny Weasley had undergone a very stressful year at Hogwarts. She'd had to give up so much during that year. Nineteen young gentlemen had expressed an interest in her, and she'd had to turn down each and every one. Okay, so she shagged four of them, but that wasn't the point. She'd had to keep herself available for Harry. She knew that he'd come back, and when he did, he would be hers. Oh, yes... he would be hers.

Arthur Weasley was content with his lot. All his children had survived the war, and in 'his children' he included Harry and Hermione. They were good kids who'd been dealt a truly shitty hand, but passed through all the trouble and strife and come out the other end, smelling of roses. He was looking forward to rebuilding the damage that had been caused by the recent war, and making the magical world a good place for everyone.

Minerva McGonagall had actually faced Voldemort himself, here in the Great Hall, and managed to survive. She was grateful for that, really, both the survival, and the opportunity of facing him. It allowed

her peace of mind to know that she'd stood and fought against the darkness. She was alive, Hogwarts was still standing, although damaged, and the Dark Lord was dead. Properly dead, this time.

Molly Weasley was a happy woman. Her family had survived the Blood War intact, and, apart from George's missing ear and Bill's scarred face, relatively unharmed. Everything was going well in her world. She still had two minor issues to sort out, that of arranging suitable matches for her youngest children, but that was well in hand. Once her plans came to their natural conclusion, everything would be right with the world.

As everyone had settled into their chairs, the two massive doors opened, landing against the walls with a 'thud', as two powerful and charismatic figures strode into the Hall. McGonagall leapt to her feet, wrapping them in tight hugs.

"Harry... damn, it's good to see you!" She said, before turning to Hermione. "And you, Hermione. Look at you... You get more beautiful everyday."

The two teens spent a moment basking under McGonagall's attention, before heading to a pair of empty chairs at the front of the hall, just in front of the Weasleys. While they were walking down, everyone was able to get a good look at the two. Each of them was wearing a pair of black jeans and boots, low heels for Hermione and good thick soles for Harry, while they wore a leather duster over the top, buttoned up to their chins. Each of them looked every inch the powerful warrior. With a fraction of a second's pause, Harry and Hermione sat in the chairs, their watches beginning to vibrate slightly.

Harry glanced at Hermione, raising an eyebrow slightly. She shook her head imperceptibly. He gave a tiny nod, before turning to the stage.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, it's an honour to see you all here today." The interim-Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt boomed out. "I am pleased to announce that the Blood War against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and his Death Eaters has been won!" The crowd cheered

loudly, enjoying the opportunity to roar their pleasure. Kingsley waited for the crowd to settle down.

“Much as I wish I could claim credit for this remarkable victory, or the Ministry itself, or the Auror corps, or the Unspeakables, I cannot. That would be dishonest, and I, for one, have had enough of dishonesty. The truth is, we would have lost, if it weren’t for the actions of two people. Just two people. Harry Potter, the ‘Man-Who-Won’ and Hermione Granger, the ‘Witch-Who-Was-With-Him’. They saved us all, and they’re here today to tell us all about this remarkable victory.”

Harry again glanced at Hermione, the eyebrow raising up. She gave him a small smile. The two hadn’t needed words to communicate for such a long time, those tiny expressions held a wealth of meaning.

“So, Mr. Potter and Miss Granger, if you would like to come up here, we’ll be able to hear the riveting tale!”

The youths in question stood up, and silently mounted the stage, standing close to each other at the podium. Kingsley quickly headed to one of their abandoned chairs on the front row. Before they spoke, Harry and Hermione took the opportunity to look around the hall, noting peoples’ reactions. They’d agreed, before attending, to take a ‘read’ on the crowd.

Hermione was looking intently at each of the Weasleys, performing subtle Legilimency on them. She quickly checked out other targets, Rita Skeeter among them, along with several high-profile politicians. When she was finished, she held up her hands. “If you could just give us a minute.” She flicked her wand, casting Muffliato around the pair, as they quickly began whispering to each other.

“Okay, Hermione, what you got?”

Hermione glanced into the crowd, before turning her back to face Harry. Whilst Lip-reading wasn’t a common skill in the magical world, since there were so many other ways of magically eavesdropping, it wouldn’t do to discount the possibility. “Ron’s looking at us, wondering why we’re standing so close. He thinks you’re a twat and



I'm his bitch, and he can't wait to have me under control and underneath him." She shivered slightly. "Creepy little shit."

Harry nodded slowly. "I saw the glares Ginny's sending your way. What did you get from her?"

"Apparently," Hermione chuckled, "I'm a filthy Mudblood bitch, and Ron will soon teach me my place. Also, I'm not to stand too close to you, because you belong to her. She's planning on spiking you, again, after your speech."

Harry held up his arm slightly, showing a slightly battered wrist watch. "Yeah, I guessed that. That's why this thing's been vibrating since we got here. What about Molly?"

"Pretty much the same." Hermione sighed. "She was thinking about all the things she can buy when Ginny gets your vaults, and she's looking forward to teaching me how to properly keep a home for her 'ickle Ronniekins." Quickly anticipating Harry's next question, she continued. "Arthur's happy we're alive, and he hopes we can find some happiness now the war's over. I always liked him."

With a slight chuckle, Harry nodded. Hermione carried on. "Bill's happy his family survived, and he also wants you to marry Ginny, since that'll make her happy. Apparently, Princess Ginnykins can do no wrong, and he's a bit pissed at you for leaving her behind last year."

Harry snorted. "Yeah, being stalked is such a pleasant pastime. Apart from the fact that she's borderline psychotic, she'd have been bloody useless on the Hunt. What about Charlie, and Percy?"

"Ah, Charlie's about the same as Bill. He wants to go home, Romania, not the Burrow, and tend to his dragons, but he also was the Princess to be happy, and if that means snagging you, then that's what he'll help them do. I'll leave Percy to the last, 'cause he's interesting-

"Mr. Potter?" Shacklebolt's voice shouted from the audience. "We're waiting."

Harry lowered the Muffliato. "I understand, Minister, and I'll beg your indulgence for a few moments longer. We're just discussing the best way to disclose some of the information. It's... sensitive, and some will possibly have to be censured. Just a moment please, sir." He waited for Shackbolt to nod, before recasting the charm. "Sorry, Hermione, you were saying?"

She smiled. "Fred and George... I'm afraid they're lost to us. As far as they're concerned, we belong to the Weasley family, and when we're married off, they can pick my brains for prank ideas and strategy, and dip into your vault for expansion and research. It's a shame, really... I liked them two."

"True... but then again, we took steps quite a while ago, didn't we?"

"Yeah... still a bit painful, though." Hermione nibbled her bottom lip for a moment, before straightening. "As I said, Percy's the most interesting. He's been drawing up plans so that all Muggleborns and half-bloods become registered. If the Ministry don't like them for some reason, they can be the subject of a ritual to transfer their magical core to a worthy pureblood, increasing their own powers. From what I can tell, you and I are at the absolute top of that list."

"Joy. We'll be safe enough, though." Harry sighed. "Anyone else?"

"Skeeter." Hermione hissed in a low voice. "The bitch is hoping to get another book out of us, something appropriately scandalous. Bloody tart."

"Fair enough." Harry gave a slight nod, which she returned, before dropping the charms.

"My apologies, ladies and gentlemen." Harry said politely. "There are some details about the last seven years that must remain confidential, for the Greater Good. Now, it's difficult to know where to begin our tale. Hmm... Hermione, any ideas?"

She grinned, and began unbuttoning her coat, revealing a black t-shirt with white writing, which quickly vanished as she turned round. Harry copied suit, undoing his coat, but facing forward.

McGonagall recognised the shirts straight away. After all, she'd given them to the teens in the first place, two years ago. She suppressed a grin as she realised that the shit was truly going to hit the fan today. She conjured a bowl of popcorn, passing some across to Filius on her left, and Vector on her right.

Harry pulled off his duster, draping it carefully across the chair behind him. On the front of his shirt, in bright white letters, was the legend, 'Boy-Who-Lived: Hogwarts Hero'. As Hermione draped her coat across the chair, she turned round, smiling widely, as her shirt revealed the legend, 'Girl-Who-Shagged-the-Boy-Who-Lived'.

Several people began to protest loudly, but through the use of a quick cannon-blast charm, order was restored. Harry cleared his throat. "Now, in order for us to tell you what happened, you'd better get comfortable, for it is a long, thrilling tale. And we won't be telling it alone. We'll have a couple of portraits helping us."

He turned and began to reach into the pockets of his jacket. While Harry was rooting round, Hermione smiled at McGonagall. "By the way, Professor McGonagall, thanks for these shirts. It's the first time we've worn them in public."

"It's truly my pleasure, Hermione." McGonagall called back, grinning at her ex-students. From her seat near the back, she could almost hear the seething indignation of the Weasley family.

Harry turned back to the stage, a miniature aluminium briefcase in his hand. "Can you conjure me up a couple of stands, Hermione?" While Hermione was flicking her wand, conjuring the items, he enlarged the briefcase to its normal size, taking out a couple of small picture frames.

Quickly, the two worked on the stage, setting up five easels, onto each of which they placed one of the covered objects. An Engorgio restored the items to their normal size, that of three feet by two feet.

"Before we begin, I think we need to sound off." Harry called out, quite loudly.

From underneath the very left hand cover, a voice sounded. "Grandpappy Firebird!" The voice was very familiar to everyone in the Great Hall. After all, it was the voice of the most famous wizard in the world, and the one whom many considered to be the greatest wizard in the world.

The next painting was a voice that was similar to Harry's but just a touch different. "Prongs." Another voice sounded, feminine and musical. "Tiger-Lily." The next painting coughed. "Padfoot." The item on the next stand was a little different. It was far flatter than the others items, barely a quarter of an inch thick. "Moony." A second voice sounded. "ChamKlutz and Ripples."

There was silence for a moment. Harry cleared his throat loudly, staring at the fifth and final stand. Silence. Harry cleared his throat again.

"Fine. The Batman." A sulky, petulant voice called from the last painting.

"There we go." Harry said jovially, turning back to the crowd. With a flick of his wand, the cloths covering the painting vanished.

Headmaster portraits of Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape, family portraits of James and Lily Potter, and Sirius Black, and finally, a large communications mirror, showing Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks.

"What?" Molly Weasley stood up, her eyes locking on the mirror. "You... you died!"

Moony sneered at her, since he knew what she really was, before deliberately turning away from her. "Your show, cub."

Harry faced the crowd. "The story of my life is well-publicised. Everyone 'knows' everything about me, my parents, my godfather... everything. You all 'know' things to be true." He gave them a little sneer. "It's time for me to come clean. You only know what we," He

gestured to himself, Hermione and the portraits, "have allowed you to know.

"There are those who believe that Albus Dumbledore was the greatest wizard who ever lived, topped only by Merlin, and even then, only just. Others say that Albus Dumbledore was a chessmaster, a manipulative old man who used people like pawns. A scheming old bastard who planned every facet of my life, so that I would die heroically in battle against the armies of Lord Voldemort." Harry glared at Rita Skeeter, who flinched under the scrutiny of those emerald orbs. "There are others who say that Albus Dumbledore was a fraud and a liar, a Dark Arts user, and far worse."

He sighed, giving the group a hard stare. "And you're all right. And you're all wrong. Because, the image that all of you have of Dumbledore, whether Dark, Light, Grey or indifferent, is exactly what he allowed you all to see. And best of all, he had to do so little to promote that image." Harry turned round, looking at Snape, who was sneering at him from his frame. "Oh, stop it, you pillock. We're going to tell them everything. You might as well 'fess up now."

Snape's portrait frowned for a moment, before walking out of the side of his frame. Harry chuckled, turning back to the crowd. "Severus Tobias Snape. Murderer. Death Eater. Evil. Greasy Git. Again, none of you knew him. I'm not arrogant enough to think that I knew everything about him, but I'd be willing to be my entire family fortune I knew him better than you did."

In the portrait, Snape returned, a towel around his shoulders, his hair clean and damp. He'd gotten rid of his dour black robes, wearing a clean white t-shirt with the legend, 'Avada Kedavra: When you absolutely positively have to kill every Weasley in the room... accept no substitutes'. He sat in his chair, a warm smile on his face.

"The truth of Severus Tobias Snape... is something we shall be covering, for the 'greasy git', as far too many of you think of him, was a façade, a ploy to fool Death Eaters. And they were fooled... as were all of you. You all made assumptions and you were wrong."

Again, Ron lurched to his feet. "No, we weren't! He was an evil bastard! He killed Dumbledore! You saw him! You told us!"

Snape sneered from his portrait. "Again, Weasley, your stupidity is only matched by your short temper. When you admit, you pathetic child, that you know nothing, maybe... just maybe, there will be some hope for you."

"Come on, Sevvie." Padfoot called from his portrait. "Play nice with the idiot."

Snape sneered back. "You're fortunate to have had limited encounter with the dolt, Mutt. And behave, or I shall come across there with a rolled-up newspaper."

"Will you two play nice?" Harry said, his tone amused. "Good lord, do I have to separate you two?" He mock-glared at the portraits. "Again?"

With a snigger, Harry turned back to the audience. "Anyway, moving on. You were asking us for basically our life story. And what a story it is! Bugles, battles and bags of glory. Heroic deeds, and crushing betrayal. Life, love and the universe."

Harry turned to Hermione, who nodded, grinning widely. As one, the two reached up to their collars, pulling out a chain, with an object attached. The two casually snapped the chains, dropping them to the floor, before putting the items onto their hands. Harry and Hermione raised their left hands, clinking them together.

The rings they had just placed onto their fingers glowed brightly for a moment, before fading.

"What the bloody fuck's that, Potter!" Ron spat from the audience. Again, if looks could kill, both would drop dead on the spot.

Harry looked at Ron, as though he were mentally challenged. Which, if asked for an honest opinion, Harry would say he was. "It's a wedding ring, Ronald. I'm sure you've seen them before. Your Mum and Dad each wear one, don't they?"

"That's not the point, Potter!" Ron snapped. "They're married! Why the fuck are you wearing one?"

This time, Hermione gave him the mentally-challenged glare. "Because he's married too, you bloody idiot! Why the hell else would he wear a wedding ring?"

"Then why are you wearing one?" Ginny asked, her tone controlled, but everyone in the Great Hall could hear the barely-contained fury in her voice.

"Because I'm married, Ginevra." Hermione replied, not sparing the tiny redhead a second glance.

With gritted teeth, Ginny asked the question everyone wanted to know. "And who are you married to, Granger?"

Hermione looked at Harry. "Is she speaking to me, husband?"

Nodding slowly, Harry drawled, "I do believe she is, wife. I could be wrong, though. Did your parents come along after all? They're the only Grangers I know. Tucked away at the back, maybe?"

The rest of their conversation was cut off, as Molly Weasley began to loudly berate Ron. "Why couldn't you just follow your instructions, and stay with them while you were off on that damned fool crusade? Because you let your foolish pride get in the way, we've lost everything!"

Harry cleared his throat, regaining the Weasleys' attention. "I hate to disappoint you, Molly... actually, that's a lie. I don't hate to disappoint you at all. Secretly, I rather enjoy it. Hmm... anyway, Ron abandoning us during our mission over the last year didn't make a lick of difference to us. We were married before we left on the hunt. For more details... well, you'll have to wait."

"Harry?" Ginny spoke quietly, a tremor in her voice. "I thought you loved me." A single tear dropped out of her eyes, making it's way

slowly down her cheek. "You said you had to break up with me... to keep me safe. You didn't want me hurt when you left."

Harry looked at Ginny with an expressionless gaze. "A masterful performance, Miss Weasley, but you're mistaken. Don't you remember me telling you all that what you think you know... you don't know? You all think what we wanted you to think. It was necessary." Harry turned to Dumbledore, who nodded. "It was, after all, for the Greater Good."

Dumbledore chuckled, reaching into the bowl in his painting for a lemon drop. "I'm sorry I can't offer one to you, Harry, but I seem to be a little stuck these days."

Hermione reached into her pocket, pulling out a small paper bag. She took a lemon drop and threw it into her mouth, then passed the bag to Harry, who took one. Harry looked at McGonagall, who nodded. The bag soared over the crowd, landing neatly in McGonagall's hand.

"Now, where to begin? Hmm... Ah, yes. Our fascinating tale probably begins in 1985..."

Flashback: #4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey  
Sunday, 18th August, 1985

Five-year old Harry Potter was in abject agony. He'd been sat on his bed, clutching his newly-broken wrist, for what felt like days. Dudley had picked up the fireplace poker and hit him with it, breaking his wrist. Naturally, his uncle, annoyed with his crying, and forced him into his cupboard and slammed the door shut.

He wondered what would happen next. Would Uncle Vernon allow him to have his wrist fixed? Would it go bad and drop off? Would he still be made to do his chores? He was so lost in his musings that he didn't notice three figures enter the house, creeping past his cupboard door and into the living room. The 'thump' of three falling bodies, however, did catch his attention.



A loud, clear and powerful voice calling "Harry!" made him whimper. Was someone else coming to punish him for being a freak? A shadow formed underneath his door, revealing a figure stood in the hallway.

The door opened, revealing a tall man, clad in dark clothes. "Harry?"

He nodded slowly. "Y-Yes, sir."

The man held out his hand. "Would you come with me into the living room, Harry?" He asked politely. With a shaking hand, he held out his good arm, allowing the man to gently pull him to his feet, before leading him into the living room. Stacked in a haphazard pile in the corner were his relatives, while two other figures were sitting on the couch.

One of them could only be described as the oldest man Harry had ever seen. He certainly had the longest beard that Harry could remember seeing, and the man simply exuded power. "H-Hello, sir." Harry said timidly.

"Ah, Harry. It's nice to see you again, but you probably don't remember me, do you?"

"N-No, s-sir. I'm s-sorry. I don't." Harry apologised.

The man smiled. "Don't worry, Harry. You were only a baby when I saw you last. My name is Albus Dumbledore, this ravishing young lady is Minerva McGonagall and the gentleman next to you is Severus Snape. We are teachers at a special school, which you will have the option of attending when you're eleven years old."

"Hello." Harry said timidly, looking up at Snape. The man smiled, before kneeling down to Harry.

"Do you mind if I see your wrist, Harry? It looks like it's been hurt."

Harry automatically extended his arm, whimpering slightly as he jarred it. Snape gently took hold of Harry's forearm.

"This looks painful, Harry. Would you like me to heal it for you?" Snape asked kindly.

"Please, sir." Harry said. To Harry's amazement, the man pulled out a stick, waving it over the damaged joint. A jolt of pins of needles flooded his wrist for a few moments, making Harry hiss in pain, before a soothing numbness washed over him.

"Now, that'll be all better in the morning, Harry. Make sure you don't overextend the use of it, though." Snape said, gently guiding the boy to an armchair, before settling next to Mrs. McGonagall.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "We have come here tonight, Harry, because we detected that you'd been hurt, and we were worried about you."

"Worried about me, sir?" Harry asked. "Why, sir? My relatives have told me that I'm a useless freak, and nobody cares about me." He instantly got scared when a look of thunderous rage filtered over all three adults' faces, before it vanished.

"I'm sorry, Harry." Dumbledore said. "Truly sorry. I wish we could take you away from here. I really do."

"C-Can't you, sir?" Harry asked, a sniffle in his voice. "T-They... they don't like me."

McGonagall sniffed herself, wiping away tears on a hanky. Dumbledore looked to be a little misty-eyed himself, while Snape remained impassive. Harry could see a hint of something in his eyes. Was that compassion?

"Harry, have you heard of the law?" Dumbledore asked after a moment.

Harry cocked his head. "Like policemen, sir?"

"Policemen'?" Mrs. McGonagall asked.

“Muggle Aurors.” Dumbledore explained casually, before turning to Harry. “Not quite, Harry. Policemen are the people who enforce the law, but the Law itself is a series of rules that all people must obey.”

“Oh. A list of rules. Okay, sir.”

“Now, the law states that an orphan, like yourself, Harry, must be placed with family members, before they are allowed to be adopted. That is why you live with your... relatives.” Dumbledore glanced over at the stacked Dursleys, a look of venom on his face. “Believe me, I wish I could take you home with me, or Minerva, or Severus... but alas, that would be breaking the law.”

“And the policemen would come for you.” Harry concluded, sadness permeating the room. “I understand, sir.”

“Yes.” Dumbledore said proudly. “Yes, you do. You’re a very clever young man, Harry. Now, the law also states that we are not allowed to... to interfere in your home life. This would make us criminals.”

“Oh...” Harry slumped a little. “Does that mean Dudley will hit me again?”

Severus gave a small snarl, and a very significant look at Dumbledore. “We can’t break the law, Severus. You know this.” He graced Snape with a small smile. “We can, however, bend it to suit our needs.”

“Anti-Violence wards.” McGonagall said, nodding at Dumbledore, before turning to Harry. “I knew your parents, Harry. I was their teacher when they were at school. Our time here tonight is limited, and we’ll have to make sure it remains secret, but we will be able to come back and see you occasionally.”

Harry gave them a warm smile, making all three adults’ hearts melt in their chests. “Thank you for coming to see me.” He said politely, before turning to Snape. “And thank you for healing my wrist, sir.”

Snape nodded slowly. “You’re more than welcome, Harry.”

“There is one other thing, Harry.” Dumbledore said. “In our world, you’re very famous, and we’ve received a lot of letters and gifts for you. However, your... relatives, have decreed that we are not allowed to send these items to you. I have been keeping them for you at school, and will be able to pass them across when you arrive there.”

Again, Dumbledore cleared his throat. “Now, Harry, it would be better for everyone if you were to... forget that you’ve seen us here this evening. Strictly speaking, we’re not supposed to be here. So, with your permission, I’d like to hide this memory in your mind. You won’t forget it, but you won’t be able to recall it until later. Will that be okay?”

Harry looked at McGonagall’s kindly face, and Snape’s nice actions. “W-Will it hurt?”

“No, Harry.” McGonagall said softly. “You just won’t remember for a while, that’s all. We promise.”

“C-Can I hold your hand when you do it?”

Snape and McGonagall replied “Of course!” in unison, moving slightly apart so Harry could sit in between them, taking a hand of each of them.

Albus stood and kneeled in front of Harry, raising his wand, before hesitating... then lowering his wand.

“Albus?” McGonagall asked.

With a devilish wink, Dumbledore leaned in closer. “Harry, would you like to see something very special?”

Harry nodded. As if on cue, a burst of flame erupted just above Dumbledore’s shoulder, a beautiful, fiery-red bird landing on Dumbledore’s shoulder. “This is Fawkes, Harry. He’s my... my pet.”

With a childish smile of joy, Harry leaned forward, looking closely at Fawkes, who stared back, before letting out a short burst of song. Harry felt his heart lift in his chest. He felt really good!

"W-What kind of bird is he, sir?" Harry asked, not taking his eyes off Fawkes.

"He's a Phoenix, Harry. He's a magical bird... and he's my friend."

"A phoenix? A firebird, sir?"

"Yes." Dumbledore replied. "And he's a very special firebird, too. He'll be able to watch over you, and keep you safe. You won't see him, but he always be there."

Fawkes trilled soothingly, nodding at Dumbledore's words. Harry giggled at the funny picture.

"And now, Harry, the hour draws near. We must go, soon. Remember, Fawkes will watch over you."

"And be nice to any cats that you see, Harry." McGonagall added. "Cats can be great friends to you, too."

"I'll remember, ma'am." Harry replied solemnly. He glanced at the three of them. "Will I see you again?"

"Do you want to?" Snape asked, squeezing Harry's hand reassuringly.

"Yes, sir."

"Then you shall, Harry." Snape said, his voice firm and even. "You shall see us again."

"And now, Harry, if you'd watch the stick, you shall fall asleep, and dream of Fawkes."

"Goodbye... Grandpappy Firebird." Harry said, keeping his eyes on the wand, which flashed red for a moment. He slumped back, the Obliviate sending him straight to sleep.

McGonagall burst out laughing at Dumbledore's expression at being called 'Grandpappy Firebird'. "Come on, Grandpappy. Time to put this young man back to bed, and set up those wards."

Snape carefully lifted Harry, carrying him back to the cupboard, before laying him on his bed. With a sigh, he closed the door. "I wish there was more we could do, Albus."

Dumbledore sighed heavily. "I know, old friend. I do, too. But, you know the law. We are not permitted to use magic against Muggles unless it is a life-threatening situation. The Wizengamot would surely declare this situation does not qualify. Unfortunately, our hands are tied in this matter. Arabella is living a few doors down, and will be able to watch over him. Fawkes will also monitor him, and we have the ward monitors."

"I hate this." McGonagall hissed, some of her more feline instincts rising to the surface. "James and Lily's son... are you sure there's no way, Albus?"

"You know the law as well as I do, Minerva. As long as he has a living relative, Harry is bound by Wizarding law to live with them. However hateful the Dursleys are, they have granted him houseroom, 'sealing the deal', as they say. If we interfere, we would be breaking the law." Dumbledore smiled at McGonagall. "Besides, I'm sure Mr. Potter will soon be seeing a rather fetching tabby cat roaming the neighbourhood."

"Aye." McGonagall agreed. "Let's set the wards and leave. I'm convinced that vile woman's decorating is making me itch."

With a few flicks of their wands, a new series of wards were set up over #4 Privet Drive, that would ensure no violence could be committed there, allowing Harry some relative safety. With a final sigh, the three vanished with a soft 'pop', while a young boy dreamed of a beautiful red bird.

Harry finished recounting the tale, taking a small sip of a hastily-conjured glass of water. The crowd was hanging on every single word.

“You know, I remember reading in a certain book by Rita Skeeter how she described Professor Dumbledore’s relationship with me as ‘unhealthy, even sinister’.” Harry fixed an evil glare on said author. “Albus Dumbledore was like a grandfather to me. He watched over me as I was growing up, intervening here and there, to help keep me safe.”

“Bullshit!” An incredulous Ron shouted from the audience. “Do you really expect us to believe that Snivellus could be nice to you?”

“You know,” Snape drawled from his portrait, “it never ceases to amaze me how often a Weasley can put their foot into their mouths.” Giving his patented Death Glare™ to Ron, Snape turned his attention to Harry. “As a five year old, you were adorable. What happened?”

“Hey!” Lily and Harry snapped in unison, the latter spinning on his heel. “I’m still adorable!” Harry continued, grinning at Snape, who crossed his eyes at him. Lily scowled at Severus.

“At least he has manners, Sev’. And he’s right... he’s still adorable.” Lily smiled at her son, proud of the man he’d become.

Harry turned back to the audience. “I was watched over. Protected. Cared for. And then Hagrid came to get me from the Dursleys on my eleventh birthday. I went to Diagon Alley and got my supplies. On September 1st, I boarded the Hogwarts Express, meeting up with the Weasleys. Sorted into Gryffindor, and enjoyed the opening feast, not remembering what had happened six years earlier. But, I got a note from Professor Dumbledore, to report to his office after the feast.

“And during that meeting, I began the most... active and interesting Hogwarts education in the history of the school.”

## – CHAPTER ONE –

School Year: 1991-1992

The Great Hall, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Saturday, 1st August, 1998

Harry smiled at the crowd. “After the Sorting feast, I followed Professor McGonagall up the stairs to the Headmaster’s office, where Professors Snape and Dumbledore were waiting. I saw Fawkes, and a wave of memory overcame me.”

Flashback: Headmaster’s Office, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Saturday, 1st September, 1991 – 21:58

As Harry entered the room, he looked around shyly, noting the shelf full of silver instruments, spinning and puffing smoke. All around the walls, a series of paintings hung, the people inside watching him as he looked around.

“Ah, Harry. It’s good to see you.” Dumbledore said, smiling happily at Harry. “I’m glad that you decided to attend Hogwarts, my boy. Truly glad.”

“Thank you, sir.” Harry replied softly. “I’m glad to be here.”

“Good, good.” Dumbledore held out his bowl of lemon drops. “Would you care for a lemon drop? I know we’ve just finished dinner, but one sweet can’t hurt.” He popped one into his own mouth.

Harry took a lemon drop, pushing it into his cheek, so he could carry on speaking, while Dumbledore offered the lemon drops to McGonagall and Snape. “You asked to see me, sir?”

“Yes, I did. I’d like your permission to perform a spell on you to restore a memory, Harry.” Dumbledore intertwined his fingers on his desk. “Six years ago, we made an appearance at Privet Drive, after an incident with your cousin, and we suppressed your memory, with your permission.”



“Suppressed memory, sir?” Harry asked. His gaze was drawn as a soothing trill of song filled his ears. As he looked to his right, he saw a perch, a beautiful red bird staring at him. “You... I’ve dreamed about you...” He stood up, ignoring the adults for a moment, as he walked tentatively to the firebird. “I... I’ve seen you before, haven’t I?”

Fawkes trilled softly, leaning forward so Harry could start to scratch his head. He trilled in pleasure as Harry tickled under his chin. “I didn’t think you were real...”

Dumbledore cleared his throat, looking thoroughly amused at the situation. Harry blushed as he turned back. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“Quite all right, Harry. Quite all right indeed. Fawkes is a compelling sight to anyone. Now, may I restore your memory?” At Harry’s nod, Dumbledore raised his wand, a small flash of white light erupting from the end, impacting Harry squarely on the forehead.

Harry blinked as a short memory, from just after his fifth birthday, reappeared in his mind. It only took a moment for total recall. “Oh, I remember. I wondered how my wrist healed.” He looked up at Snape. “Thank you again, sir, for healing my wrist.”

“You’re more than welcome, Harry.” Snape said, smiling warmly at the boy. “Have you had any other such injuries since?”

Harry shook his head. “No... every time it seemed Dudley was about to hit me, he’d... get bored, and go and do something else. I always wondered why.”

“That was us.” McGonagall said. “We put a set of wards, a form of protection, over the house, so they couldn’t hurt you.”

Nodding slightly, Harry began to blush again. He looked at Dumbledore. “Did I really call you ‘Grandpappy Firebird’, sir?”

Dumbledore sent a mock-glare at McGonagall when she started sniggering, while Snape hid a small smile. “Yes, Harry. I should thank you, really. It kept Minerva amused for months afterwards.”

“Still does...” McGonagall managed to gasp out through her sniggers.

“I’m sorry, sir.” Harry replied, looking down at his hands.

“Harry.” Dumbledore said, making the young man look up. “Please do not be embarrassed. I’ve been called far worse. It was... endearing, really. And, as I said, it kept Minerva happy and laughing. If an endearing name can keep my friends amused, I’m more than happy to be the recipient.”

“Okay, sir.”

“Now, we asked you here to answer any questions that I’m sure you must have, Harry. I know that, if I were in your situation, I would certainly have questions.”

Harry nodded vigorously. “Yes, sir. About my parents, sir. They came to Hogwarts, didn’t they?”

“Indeed, Harry.” Dumbledore replied. “They began attending in 1971, and graduated with high honours in 1978. A fine pair of people they were. Professor McGonagall was their head of house. I’m sure she’d be able to share many recollections about them with you. Professor Snape was a year-mate with them, and he knew your mother before you began at Hogwarts. I’m sure he’ll have many fascinating stories and anecdotes to share with you.”

Harry looked at McGonagall, who nodded, then at Snape, who smiled warmly. “I can think of a few tales.”

“However,” Dumbledore said, regaining Harry’s attention, “the evening wears on. It wouldn’t be prudent for us to sit tonight and listen to enjoyable tales. What I suggest is that, every Sunday, you spend time with some of the Professors and Madam Pomfrey, our Medi-Witch, and ask them for stories.”

“Come and see me tomorrow, Harry.” McGonagall offered. “I’ll be able to share some details.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Harry replied politely. “Ten am?”

“That’ll be fine.” McGonagall smiled, then turned back to Dumbledore.

“Your next question, young Harry?” Dumbledore asked.

“Sir... why do I have to live with the Dursleys? They really don’t like me, sir.”

“Ah...” Dumbledore sighed, “a difficult question, Harry, but certainly a fair one. The basic tenant of Wizarding law is that family is important. If a child loses their parents, and they have a living relative that is capable of supporting them, then that child must be placed with them. It’s true, many Wizarding families wanted to take you in after your parents’ untimely deaths, but the law stated that you must go to your aunt’s house, however unpleasant she may be. If you were to be placed anywhere else, it would be violating the law.”

“Oh...”

“There is also an advantage to you living with the Dursleys, Harry. Since she is your mother’s sister, we were able to create a unique set of defensive wards about the property, based on familial blood. No-one affiliated with Voldemort or his Death Eaters will be able to harm you there. Those wards actually protected you from six kidnapping attempts between 1983-1987. Each time, the perpetrator was arrested by Magical Law Enforcement.”

Harry nodded, assimilating the information. It made sense. “There was one other thing, sir... according to my aunt Petunia, I was left on the doorstep in a blanket.”

McGonagall nodded. “Yes, you were. We couldn’t afford to be seen, unfortunately. However, we cast a long-term warming charm and a Somnus charm, not to mention a notice-me-not ward over the step. You were warm, comfortable and would remain asleep for a good length of time.”

Again, Harry nodded. He’d been wondering how the hell anyone decent human being could leave a baby on a doorstep at the

beginning of winter. This answered that question. "Sir... can you tell me about Voldemort?" He asked. He was pleased to note that neither Snape nor McGonagall flinched at the name, as everyone else had during the train ride.

Dumbledore chuckled dryly. "I know quite a bit about the self-styled 'Lord' Voldemort, Harry. I spent years learning about him, so that he could be fought. With the exception of himself, I would wager that I know more about him than anyone else alive." He looked down his long nose at Harry. "Do you... do you remember anything about that night?"

"I... I've had dreams." Harry said after a moment of contemplation. "Small things... I see a flash of green light... and someone laughing. It's... it's a cruel laugh. Sounds like Dudley when he's just hurt someone."

With a sigh, Dumbledore nodded slowly. "There is very little known about what happened on that night ten years ago, Harry. There are no witnesses, so we can only make an educated guess. Voldemort was a very powerful wizard, Harry, one of the most powerful in the world. He wished to rule, and attacked anyone who disagreed with him."

"Like a terrorist, sir?" Harry asked.

"A what? I'm sorry, I'm unfamiliar with that word." Snape admitted.

"Yes, Harry, Voldemort was what the Muggles would consider a terrorist. A person who attacks targets designed to cause fear and apprehension amongst his enemies. The Potters, your parents, believed that terrorists like Voldemort shouldn't be allowed. They fought against him, believing that tolerance and peace were a better way of life than fear and violence."

"But... he's just one man, sir." Harry said. "Couldn't he be fought?"

Snape plastered a grim smile on his face. "He was very powerful, Harry, but he wasn't just one man. He had an organisation, a group of witches and wizards who believed in his ideals. They called

themselves 'Death Eaters', and they were a bunch of murderous thugs. They revelled in chaos and destruction." Snape seemed to pause for a moment, before gathering his courage.

"I joined the Death Eaters when I left school. I thought that Voldemort would be an engine for change, getting rid of bigotry and intolerance. There was an incident shortly after I obtained my Mastery in Potions that truly enraged me. I believed that by joining the Death Eaters, I would be researching potions to cure diseases, stamping out the bigotry... I was a fool. Naïve and gullible. I was used. When I found out the truth about the situation, barely three months into my tenure, I left, came to Dumbledore. He offered me sanctuary, and a chance to do some good. I became a spy, reporting information to Professor Dumbledore, so that we could stop some of the attacks."

"Hmm... so, you fought for the good guys, sir?"

Snape chuckled. "Yes. I fought for the good guys, against the bad guys. However, this leads us to our current situation. Voldemort, while currently without a body, is not yet dead. The 'bad guys' are still around, Harry, waiting, watching, listening. And worst of all, they now have children. A prime example would be the Malfoy family. They were caught, in full Death Eater robes, and with a 'contribution' to the Ministry of Magic, they were suddenly innocent."

"I met a Malfoy on the train." Harry said slowly. "I didn't like him. He's... arrogant. He seems like a bully. He was telling me how he can help me 'avoid the wrong sort'. I didn't understand what he meant."

"Yes, well, Mr. Malfoy will undoubtedly be a thorn in your side, Harry." Snape said. "Because I'm a teacher in this school, as well as a spy, I have to 'suck up' to the little miscreants. Malfoy will expect you to pay homage to him, because he's 'the right sort', as he will expect from me."

"But, what does that mean, sir?" Harry asked.

"Ah... you've heard about purebloods, haven't you?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes, sir. They were in some of my textbooks. Purebloods are people who have nothing but witches and wizards in their family for recorded history."

"Correct, and I'm glad that you've been reading your textbooks. Education is very important, Harry. Now, on the other end of the spectrum, you have Muggleborns, a witch or wizard who is the first in their family to show magic. So, old families on one end, and brand new on the other. Then you have the categories in between. Muggleborn parents, Muggleborn/Pureblood marriages, Pureblood/Muggle marriages, all produce magical children, with no appreciable difference in power or abilities. However, a powerful minority of the purebloods believe that they're better than everyone else."

"So, this minority... they're all idiots, sir?" Harry asked innocently.

"Arrogant, inbred, bigoted idiots." Snape replied, grinning at Harry. "Oh, yes, they are. What truly matters is ability, Harry. Ability, and your choices. You have gifts. You can use them for good, or evil. It is your choice to make."

"I understand, sir."

"Harry, one more thing before you go. Do you remember that I told you about a series of letters and packages that have been arriving for you?"

Harry thought for a moment, going over his newly restored memory. "Yes, sir."

"We've been keeping them to one side for you, in one of the storerooms. When a package was received, we arranged to mail a notification to the sender, thanking them for your gift and informing them that you would be unable to reply, since you were in the Muggle world, without access to owl post.

"Any package that contained money has been added to a new Gringotts vault, #1194; we didn't want to allow your relatives the opportunity of stealing it. Any clothing that was sent that you have

obviously outgrown was sent to magical orphanages in your name. Some people sent alcohol and other age-restricted gifts to you; these have been also placed into your new Gringotts vault, so that you may access them when you're of-age, at 17. All the letters and toys have been put into the storeroom for you. I would suggest that you spend some time going over these." Dumbledore said kindly, before glancing at his watch..

"Now, I must insist that you head to bed, young man. You've got an appointment with Professor McGonagall in the morning, and you've certainly had a long and exciting day. We're here if there's anything that you need to talk about. Also, I would suggest that, if you get a free moment, you look up information regarding the history of blood-status in the Wizarding world. That sort of information can only be beneficial to you."

Harry stood, nodding respectfully to Dumbledore. "Yes, sir. Thank you for your time, sir."

"My pleasure, Harry."

"Er, sir?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Could I have another lemon drop before I go?"

Chuckling, Dumbledore held out the dish, letting Harry take a sweet, before heading out of the door, escorted by Professor McGonagall, as she led him to his dormitory.

"Well, Adrian?" Dumbledore asked the Sorting Hat.

"He'll be great." The Sorting Hat replied. "Oh, yes. Brave, intelligent, loyal and cunning. Truly a mix of the Founders."

"Any possibilities?"

"Hermione Granger. She's the one." The Hat replied smugly.

“Compatible?”

“Most definitely.”

“The ‘Potter Foible’?”

“Already activated.”

Dumbledore took a moment to think. “Good.”

“You never told me that!” Harry said indignantly to the portrait of Dumbledore.

“Of course I didn’t, my boy.” Dumbledore replied, his eyes twinkling, even through the paint. “There are some things you must learn for yourself. This was most certainly one of them.”

“Wait a minute!” A voice called from the crowd. Harry and Hermione stood on tiptoes, looking to see who it was. Ernie McMillan. Harry suppressed a minor groan, as the pompous prick carried on speaking. “Dumbledore was trying to turn you against purebloods! He said it himself!”

Percy cleared his throat, standing up and adjusting his glasses. “Yes... I heard that, too. This is very disturbing, Mr. Potter. This sort of bigotry will warrant investigation by the Ministry.” He sat down, scribbling notes on his parchment.

Harry looked at Hermione, who shrugged slightly. She decided to take this one. “Mr. Weasley, Mr. McMillan, were you not listening? At no point did anyone spout bigotry in that meeting. What Albus and Severus actually said was that ability is what matters, and then suggested that Harry look up the information, and make his own decision. Surely, the best way of teaching. The ‘superiority’ of purebloods vs. those with Muggle blood is something we can look into later.”

“What’s the ‘Potter Foible’?” Ginny called up, her face still sulky. Both Harry and Hermione could almost feel her determination to ‘win Harry back’.



Dumbledore twinkled from his portrait. "In my life, I have seen four generations of Potter men pass through the halls of Hogwarts. All of them had the tendency to find their life partner early in life. They're usually the brightest witch of the generation, and often a little shy and introverted. Or, as Minerva put it, beautiful, brainy, bashful and bookish."

"Nonsense!" Molly shouted up, her face splotchy-red with anger. "The Potter love of red-haired women is famous!"

"Er, no?" James said from his portrait, looking nervously at Lily. "The red hair has nothing to do with it, although I don't deny it's beautiful." He shuffled slightly to one side, to avoid the inevitable outburst of temper. "I liked Lily because of those four B's, just like Minnie said."

Lily laughed at her husband. "Get over here, you bloody idiot. I'm not gonna snap at you." She wrapped an arm around his back, resting her head on his shoulder. She looked at Hermione. "I'm proud you're my daughter-in-law, you know."

"Thanks, Lils." Hermione replied quietly, before turning to Dumbledore. "So, you knew, on the first day, that we'd end up together?"

"Of course not!" Dumbledore protested. "I know, however, that it was possible you would be together. You and Mr. Potter are very compatible. Sometimes, not always, but sometimes, you're lucky enough to fall in love with your best friend. I was, and I'm glad to see Mr. Potter was fortunate in that regard, too."

Ron suddenly stood, his face red with rage... or possibly exertion. The poor boy's brain must have been working triple-time in order to form a coherent thought that wasn't involved with his penis, food or Quidditch. "Wait, this is all bullshit!" (Privately, Harry and Hermione were convinced they could smell burning; must have burnt through every brain cell in his head to get there.)

"Language, Mr. Weasley!" McGonagall shouted out.

“Whatever.” Ron said dismissively to her, before turning back to the stage. “You said Snape was there, and he was nice and friendly. That’s utter shite! Snape’s an evil, bigoted prick who hated you from the get-go. He was picking on you during your very first potions lesson.”

Harry nodded. “Again, Ron... you saw what we wanted you to see...”

As the group packed up their belongings at the end of the lesson, Harry made certain that his actions were slower than everyone else’s. The group trailed out, thoroughly depressed with the lecture and the day’s activities.

Flashback: Potions Dungeon, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Wednesday, 4th September, 1991 – 16:34

The last person trailed out, leaving Harry sat at his desk. “Sir?”

Snape looked up from his desk, where he was marking potions. “Mr. Potter?” He looked around the room, spotting that it was empty. With a quick flick of his wand, the door shut, and sealed with a squelch. “I’m sorry, Harry. Merlin, I hate some of those arrogant little snots.”

“That was part of your act, sir?” Harry asked, hoping that it was.

“Yes...” Snape admitted. “It’s necessary for me to play up the guise of a vile, hateful man to favour myself with the Slytherins.”

“But... I lost points, sir.”

Snape stood up, holding onto his marks book. He came round his desk, putting the book on the table next to Harry, resting a hand on his shoulder. He pointed to an entry. “This is your grade for the day, Harry.”

“An ‘E’?” Harry looked up. “Was it that bad, sir?”

“Bad? An ‘E’ is very good for your first day’s brewing, Harry. Very good indeed.”

“Oh... why not a ‘B’ then, or even an ‘A’?”

Snape looked puzzled for a moment, before realisation washed over him. “Ah, I understand. You’re used to using the Muggle grading system, where they go from ‘A’ to ‘F’, aren’t you? ‘A’ being the best, and ‘F’ being the worst. No, here in the Magical world, we use a different system of grading.”

“Oh... why?”

Snape chuckled. “The Magical world is very resistant to change, Harry, and this system was instituted centuries ago. There are six grades, like the Muggle equivalent, but they use different letters. The top grade is ‘O’ for ‘Outstanding’. That would be an ‘A’ in the Muggle world. The next grade is ‘E’ for ‘Exceeds Expectations’. That would be a ‘B’. The final pass grade is ‘A’ for ‘Acceptable’. The Muggle version would be ‘C’. In both magical and Muggle worlds, a ‘C’ or ‘Acceptable’ is the lowest pass mark.

“You then have three failing grades; ‘P’ for ‘Poor’, which would be a ‘D’ in Muggle exams, ‘D’ for ‘Dreadful’, which would be an ‘E’, and finally, ‘T’ for ‘Troll’, which would be an ‘F’.” He looked at Harry’s slightly confused look. “Grab a piece of parchment, and write this down.”

He watched as Harry pulled out a pad of lined Muggle writing paper. “This seemed to make more sense, sir. My writing’s bad enough without having it snake all over the page.” He pulled out a fountain pen, far easier to use than a quill, and wrote down what Snape told him.

“I’d suggest that you share that little scrap of information with Miss Granger, Harry.” Snape said, when Harry finished writing. “She seems to be striving for academic excellence. This will surely help her.” He closed the mark book, and picked up another book from his desk, showing it to Harry. “Now, about losing points. I took two off you. They’ll be restored by the end of the day.”

“Sir?” Harry looked at the book; it was a list of all points removed, showing that Harry had lost a point for cheek, and another for deliberately causing a class-mate to fail.

“Again, part of the act for the Death Eaters. At the end of each day, I pass the list of points to Minerva, and she restores them, either by over-awarding points in her class, or simply slipping them in at the end of the day. The only time I don’t re-award points is if someone’s done something to truly earn it. The Weasley twins spring to mind.” He mumbled the last part.

“Sir?”

“Hmm?” Snape looked up. “Sorry, Harry. The Weasley twins fancy themselves pranksters. However, a lot of their pranks go beyond the grounds of being appropriate. In their first two years, they have nearly killed three students thanks to their pranks going wrong.”

“Oh... they seemed okay, when I met them.”

“Don’t take my word for it, Harry.” Snape said. “Don’t you remember what Albus said to you in his office? Investigate, and come to your own conclusions. Don’t blindly accept what you’re told. Always look into a situation. If you get into the habit now, it will serve you well during later life.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“Not a problem. Now, why are you listening to me droning on in this drafty dungeon, when you can be outside with your friends, enjoying yourself?”

“You really expect us to believe that Snape was helpful?” Ron spat in disgust.

“No, Ron. I don’t expect you to believe anything. However, like Severus and Albus, suggested; don’t take my word for it. Investigate the situation, and come to your own conclusions. Don’t just let somebody blindly tell you what to think.” Harry replied coolly. “Personally, I think you’re far too much like Malfoy; rude, arrogant and

utterly convinced of your own superiority and intrinsic rightness. Your bigotry is ingrained in you, and nothing I can say will remove it.”

“What?” Ron roared, pulling his wand. Fortunately (for Ron), Arthur grabbed his arm with a firm hand, pulling it down.

Harry looked around the hall. “You all seem to believe that Snape was utterly useless and biased as a teacher and that he didn’t teach you anything. But, I have a question for you; did any of you go and ask him for help, if you didn’t understand his lectures? Or did you all complain, bitch and moan about his teaching style?”

In the crowd, a hand was raised. Harry saw Oliver Wood stand up slowly. “Er... I went to see him one night, during second year. He told me that he would need to cast a spell to keep his assistance quiet.”

“Yes, Mr. Wood.” Snape’s portrait called out. “And congratulations on making Puddlemere’s first squad. From what I understand, you’re well on the way to winning the league.”

“Er... yes, sir. Second on the table.” Wood replied, not quite believing that Snape was polite.

“Have you beaten Chudley yet?” Snape asked, spearing Ron with a glance.

“Yes, Professor. 580-0. Clean sheet.”

Snape cackled for a moment. “Ah, bless Chudley... they’re so brave, aren’t they? Going out to play, knowing they’ll never win. Gryffindors, through and through.”

“Shut up!” Ron shouted, again trying to pull his wand. Arthur, perhaps the most sensible Weasley, snatched it out of his hand, tucking it into his robes. “Chudley are the best team!”

“Getting back on subject.” Harry said briskly, not wanting to get into a conversation about Quidditch. “Do any of you think that Snape would survive as a teacher if he was really like that? Good God, he’d be sacked for unprofessional conduct after the first bloody day, never

mind lasting almost two decades!" He sighed, before carrying on with his tale.

"Most of the first term was pretty quiet. I was getting settled in, having weekly meetings with Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, Snape and Dumbledore, as well as Madam Pomfrey, learning about my parents. I was completely on top of my school work, being allowed to flourish as I learned. I was getting on with Ron, who, even then, struck me as a bit of an arse. Seamus seemed like a nice guy, Dean was good at drawing, and Neville sort of hid in the shadows.

"Then, that Halloween."

"Let me, Harry." Hermione said, stepping forward. Harry obediently took a step back, letting his wife have the podium. "Most of us remember what happened on Halloween of 1991. A troll got into the school. Thanks to a conversation with a certain Weasley," and she glared at Ron, "I'd spent a good portion of the day, crying in the bathroom. I felt like I didn't belong if I got shouted at and abused just because I liked learning. I was seriously considering writing to my parents, asking them to pull me out of school, and go back to the Muggle world.

"Then, the troll came in. And I was saved. But, it's what happened afterwards that changed everything..."

Flashback: First Year Boys' Dormitory, Gryffindor Tower, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Friday, 1st November, 1991 - 02:14

After a very trying evening, Harry had retired to bed. He could hear the deep breathing of Seamus, Dean and Neville, and the overpowering chainsaw buzz of Ron's snores. He was still jumpy, the fight with the troll fresh in his mind.

How could Ron be so stupid as to take the mickey out of someone who was trying to help him? And what does he do? Insults her. Laughs at her. Arsehole... He was broken from his musing by the

dormitory door opening, and a pair of soft footfalls creeping closer to his bed. Poking his head out of the curtains, he saw Hermione, nibbling on her bottom lip in nervousness.

“Can I speak to you, Harry?” She whispered.

Deciding to take a chance, he opened his curtain, letting Hermione climb onto the bed, cross her legs and start staring at him.

“So...” Harry was a little unnerved by the stare. “What can I do for you, Hermione?”

“I’d like to ask a rather personal question, Harry.” She said slowly. At his nod, she continued. “Why did you come and save me in the bathroom? I mean... I’ve not exactly been very friendly to you, have I?”

Harry shrugged. “It seemed like the right thing to do, Hermione. You didn’t know about the troll, and I felt a bit guilty that I didn’t stop Ron from flapping his mouth off at you.”

“So... you don’t hate me?” She asked shyly, looking at her hands.

“It wouldn’t matter if I liked you or hated you, Hermione.” Harry replied firmly, but quietly. “I wouldn’t let anyone get attacked if I could do something about it.”

She nodded slowly; it certainly fit the profile of a hero in the making. “Can I ask another personal question?” He nodded, since her previous question hadn’t been that personal. “D-Do... do you like me?”

Harry took a moment to decide how to answer. He could sense she was nervous, and saying the wrong thing would cause her to bolt. “I’ll be perfectly frank, Hermione; you seem like a nice person. But, your bossiness is a bit of a downer; my relatives always boss me about, and I don’t like it. I think that you’re bossy to cover up the fact that you’re nervous about being here. You’re scared you won’t fit in, so you like to throw information at people, to cover it up.”

Her jaw dropped as she looked at him. "How do you know?" She whispered.

"You're a lot like me. Muggleborn and Muggle-raised, not sure if we fit in." He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "We're both struggling to make our way through this entirely new world we've found ourselves in, where we don't know the rules. Me, I'm keeping my head down and listening, so I can learn the rules, while you're trying to read your way through the library, so you can learn the rules."

Unconsciously, she nodded. "I've been doing some reading, ever since I got back to my dormitory."

"Oh?"

"Bear with me, Harry, and I'll explain." She said, smiling at his slightly confused expression. "What do you know about magical life-debts?"

"Er... Muggle-raised, remember?"

"I'll take that to mean 'nothing'." Hermione replied. "Okay, I've just been looking it up. If a witch or wizard saves the life of another witch or wizard, they're owed something called a 'life-debt', basically a request. You saved my life, thus I owe you. You can ask any one thing of me, and I will be... compelled to do it."

"Wait." Harry said, holding up a hand. "It wasn't me that saved your life. It was Ron. He was the one who levitated the club onto the troll's head."

"And why did Ron come to the bathroom with you, Harry?" Hermione asked doggedly. "Was it his idea to come and find me... or yours?"

"Mine." Harry said slowly.

"And who instantly leapt into battle to defend me, clambering onto the troll's back to distract it?"

"Me."



“And where was Ron while you were swinging from the troll’s back?” She didn’t give him a chance to answer. “He was stood in the doorway, nearly pissing his pants in terror. And besides, you’re forgetting the key point: It’s Ron’s fault I was in that bathroom in the first place. It was his insults and patronising comments that made me go there. You can’t endanger someone’s life and then claim a life-debt when you save them.”

“Right. So, Ron’s help in the bathroom cancelled out his debt to you in the first place?”

“Not quite.” Hermione corrected. “Had Ron come alone, without any prompting, without any help and defeated the troll on his own, then he would have cancelled out his actions. As it is, he owes me. It’s not quantifiable, but in the cosmic scale of things, Weasley owes me.” She looked at him. “And I owe you.”

Harry looked at her intently. “You don’t owe me anything, Hermione. It was reward enough just being able to help you.”

Hermione, predictably, felt her heart melt at Harry’s words. Oh, that’s so romantic... She thought, sighing at Harry. “Thank you, Harry. But, it doesn’t work that way. I owe you my life. And I want to say thank you properly.” She rose up on her knees, then rested on her haunches. “Another personal question?” He nodded slowly. “Have you started having wet dreams yet?”

With his face erupting into a furious blush, Harry could only gurgle something incomprehensible.

“Focus, Harry.” Hermione said, keeping her tone low and safe. “Please.”

With herculean effort, he managed a strangled, “Yes.” He heard her sigh. “Why?”

“Because, I’d like to... well, I’d like to do something to you. Make you feel good.”

Leaping to the wrong conclusion, Harry pulled back, folding his legs against his chest. "I thought you were different!" He spat. "I thought you weren't gonna be one of those 'Boy-Who-Lived' fans!"

Hermione let out an undignified giggle. "Harry... it has nothing to do with your fame, you silly boy! It's your face!"

"Eh?" Harry just looked confused.

"Harry, you're beautiful!" Hermione exclaimed, then lowered her voice. "Sorry. You're... you're really pretty, Harry. You have a very nice face."

"Eh?" He repeated, still not getting it.

She raised herself up, crawling forward, until she was directly in front of him. With trembling hands, she reached up to his face, gently tracing the lines of his cheekbones, his jaw, and his brow. "You're really good-looking, Harry. I like you."

"Oh..." With the barest hint of realisation, Harry smiled timidly at her. "Really?"

"Yes." Hermione replied emphatically, but quietly. "Do you think I'd just come up to anyone's bed in the middle of the night?" She shook her head. "Now... would you lower your pyjamas for me?"

Harry gulped, making Hermione's eyebrow shoot up. "Do you think I'm gonna laugh at you, Harry? We've both got a lot of growing up to do, so I'm hardly going to judge you, am I?"

She reached up to his waistband, near-fighting him to get his pyjama bottoms off. When they were round his knees, she took a good look. He was adorably free of pubic hair, and was about three and a half inches long, already at full throttle. "Now, I've never done this before, so I'm sorry if I'm not too good at it." With that, she lowered her mouth onto Harry, pursing her lips and creating suction.

For Harry, that was about all it took. He felt his abdominal muscles tighten, and a boiling in his stomach. "Hermione..." With a grunt, he

came, crying out softly as Hermione maintained a steady suction. The sensation was very curious for Harry, who hadn't really begun to explore the possibilities of manual self-gratification.

Hermione, on the other hand, kept her mind focussed on pleasing Harry. When he tightened, and spluttered out her name, she knew it was time. While loitering in the common room, at the bottom of the stairs for nearly fifteen minutes, trying to gather up the courage to head up, she'd decided that if Harry agreed, she'd swallow, not complaining. After all, it was because of him that she'd be alive to swallow, so it was a fair trade.

As she felt something warm splash into her mouth, she focussed on maintaining her rhythm, making sure to ride it out. Fortunately, they were both still young, so there wouldn't be bucketfuls. After four spurts (the last of which was decidedly feeble), Hermione pulled up, making certain Harry saw her swallow noisily.

She grabbed her wand from her robe pocket, performing a breath-freshening charm, while Harry wearily pulled up his pyjamas. They looked at each other for a moment, before Hermione made a movement to climb off the bed.

"Wait." Harry said. He scrabbled under the duvet, tucking it under his chin, before he held up the side. "Do you... do you want to stay?"

With a smile, she nodded, climbing into the bed next to him, snuggling into his side, resting her head on his chest, and her arm over his waist. "This is nice..." she slurred into his chest. "Goodnight, Harry."

"Goodnight, Hermione... and thank you."

Silence reigned through the Great Hall, as the people assimilated what they'd just heard. Several people (mainly older women with far too much time on their hands) looked scandalised at Hermione's 'scarlet woman' actions, considering she was just a chit of 12. The head of an Ancient and Noble house should be with a strong, beautiful pureblood witch, not some mousy little bookworm Mudblood like Granger.

Molly Weasley was certainly one of these. Harry Potter was the property of Ginny, while the bookworm belonged to Ron. That was the order of things, and she'd put it right. She stood up, clearing her throat. "Harry?" She called out in a mock-sweet voice.

Harry glanced over at Hermione, noting the slightest hint of twitching at the corners of her mouth. He knew she was amused by their silence and shock, and was particularly looking forward to the petulant outbursts.

"Mrs. Weasley?" Harry looked into the crowd. "Is there something you wish to say?"

"Yes, dear." Molly smiled simperingly at him. "Don't you think the fact that... that girl performed that action on you, so early on in your friendship was a clue of what kind of woman she is? Shouldn't you be with a young woman who knows proper comportment, someone who shows class and breeding?"

Harry read between the lines, and got 'don't you think she's a little slag if she sucked you off?' Ah... a 'young woman who knows proper comportment', meaning an utterly dull fuck. No bloody chance. He wasn't pleased by Molly's comment, and intended to return a few choice remarks back to her, but she just had to open her mouth again.

"I mean, a man of your station, Lord of two Ancient and Noble houses, really shouldn't pollute your bloodline any further by sullying yourself with a Muggleborn." She rested a hand on Ginny's shoulder, who was looking up at Harry with sickening adoration. "I really think you and I need to have a conversation about appropriate conduct of young ladies, Harry."

Harry turned to the paintings, spotting impending blow-ups on all seven figures, and shook his head slightly. They silenced themselves, but he knew the reckoning would be coming. Deciding on a mature course of action, instead of crossing his eyes at Molly and blowing a raspberry, Harry simply raised an eyebrow. "I think you should follow the old adage of 'it's better to be silent and thought of as a fool, than to open your mouth and prove it', Mrs. Weasley." He retorted coolly.

“Any slurs against Lady Potter-Black will be met by severe action.” He very prominently turned away from Molly. “Now, for everyone else who isn’t so bloody stuck-up, allow me to clarify the tale my beautiful wife told.”

Harry heard someone scoff loudly when he said the word ‘beautiful’. He glanced at Hermione, who nodded imperceptibly. She’d spotted whoever it was that had scoffed. Another one to add to the list. “From that moment on, me and Hermione became closer. Every week while at school, she spent at least two nights a week in bed with me, snuggling, laughing, talking. When she was on her monthly cycle, she’d spend the whole time with me, and I’d take care of her. Hot water bottles, massages and comfort. We discussed everything, from Muggle school subjects to Hogwarts homework, the state of the economy, the people around us... nothing was a taboo subject for us. We formed a bond, best friends. And we knew it would last.”

“That’s bollocks!” Ron shouted, yet again interrupting the flow of conversation. He stormed to his feet. “I’m your best mate! Me! Not her! We were best friends from the first day! During the train ride!”

Harry looked at Hermione, as though to say ‘can you believe this guy?’, then at Ron. “Were... were you not paying attention when we were speaking earlier? ‘Cause I think we’ve said it twice so far; you don’t ‘know’ the truth. You only ‘know’ what we’ve allowed you to believe. Now, shut your gob, Ron. I’m getting sick of listening to you squawk pathetic protests at me.”

He turned back to Hermione, who nodded at him supportively, before facing the crowd again.

“The Christmas break during my first year, I stayed at Hogwarts. I had no desire to go back to my relatives’ house, and they had no desire for me to be there. Over the break, I received presents. My relatives didn’t give me presents, and I never sent them anything either, so that was fair. Hagrid gave me a flute. I felt kinda bad, since I didn’t get him anything, but I’d change that when I next saw him. Hermione got me a box of chocolate frogs. I’d gotten her a selection of Wizarding sweets, things that she could show to her parents, since they’re dentists.”

Harry let loose a Snape-class sneer at Ron. "Remind me, what did I get off my 'best friend', Ron? I don't recall a present from you. I'm not materialistic, and I certainly have enough wealth to buy myself anything I wanted or needed, but I would have thought that my 'best mate' would have given me something." He ignored the impending signs of a Ron eruption, (red ear tips... a dead giveaway, every time) and carried on.

"One of the presents I got was a Weasley sweater, which I found curious. Why would a woman I've never met send me a hand-made present? Especially considering it was of significantly better quality than the ones she sent to her own family. Ron said that he'd told his mother that I didn't expect any presents, a little fact I actually found both rude and quite patronising. And out of the goodness of Molly's heart, she sent a poor little orphan boy a present. Further evidence of this is that Lee Jordan was a close friend of the twins, and he never received a Weasley sweater."

Hermione cleared her throat. "If we were the suspicious type, and believe me, we are, we might just speculate that such a present was a way of endearing the Weasley family to Harry, so that he'd want to spend time with them. And it's only a short journey from spending time with them to thinking of them as replacement family. But, that's a conversation for another time. Later on today, actually."

"The final present," Harry continued, "was the old Potter family invisibility cloak. The note wasn't signed, but I'd seen that writing before, and I knew it came from Dumbledore. But the most telling part was when Ron saw it. I've seen enough jealousy and greed to recognise it, plastered all over Ron's face. Do you remember what you said, Ron?" He asked, not bothering to look over at the fuming redhead. "'I'd give anything to have one of these. Anything.' And the three times you stole it from me, only for me to recover it and have your memories modified certainly proved that statement."

"The other Weasleys turned up, announcing how I must be an honorary Weasley, since I had a Weasley jumper. I had to sit with them, since 'Christmas is a time for family.'" He again ignored the

fuming looks on the Weasleys' faces, apart from Arthur, who looked serene.

"I spent Christmas relaxing, reading up in the library. A room full of fascinating books, and oodles of free time? It was like a match made in heaven. When Hermione came back to school on the fourth of January, we had another... encounter."

Flashback: Disused Classroom, Sixth Floor, North Tower, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Saturday, 4th January, 1992 - 21:05

The New Year's feast, held on the day the students returned to the school after the Christmas break, had finally come to a close. During the entire holiday, Harry felt like he'd eaten a small farm's worth of food, and had taken to performing a few exercises, trying to get rid of some of the flab he was certain was beginning to form.

Hermione had rushed up to him as soon as the train pulled in, the students making their way straight to the Great Hall for dinner. "I need to speak to you after the feast!" She advised breathily, before digging into the meal.

Afterwards, she'd taken his arm and led him away from the other students, heading to one of the quieter areas of the castle. She slowed to a stop, and shyly lowered her hand from Harry's upper arm to his hand, waiting to see if he objected.

With a smile, Harry interlaced his fingers with hers, and carried on walking. Hermione could feel herself blushing at such a blatant display of affection, but couldn't deny that it thrilled her.

"So, where are we headed?" Harry asked.

"I overheard one of the prefects." Hermione replied. "This part of the school isn't used at the moment, so we can get some privacy. There's something I need to tell you."

Once inside the room, Hermione cast a locking spell at the door, added a silencing charm, and finished by hooking a chair under the knob. It was about the limits of her capabilities as a first year. Harry leaned against the professor's desk, resting his hands by his sides. "So, what's up?"

Hermione came and sat next to him. "I, er... I told my Mum about what happened with the troll."

"Ooh..." Harry hissed air through his teeth. "I can't imagine she was very happy about that."

She snorted. "Not really. I explained it in an appropriate context. She understood. She was more pissed at Ron for being an insensitive arse."

"You 'explained it in an appropriate context'?" Harry repeated. "How the hell would you explain a mountain troll wandering into a school full of children?"

Hermione gave him a dense look. "One of the things that all kids remember is the day a dog ran into school." Harry nodded. "I explained it the same way. A very big and dangerous dog, but the same principle. She didn't have a problem with it."

"Oh... okay... that's, er... that's good to know, Hermione." Harry said after a moment.

"Hold on, hero, I'm getting to the point. I explained how you basically saved my life." He nodded absently. "I also explained what I did to you afterwards."

Harry gurgled. Thoughts of oh, god... they'll kill me! flashed across his mind. "O-Oh? And?"

"Harry, will you, for the love of god, relax? I didn't tell my Dad, for obvious reasons, but Mum said that if it had been her and Dad, she'd have done the same thing. So, chill. You're safe." She giggled when she heard him sigh in relief. "They also gave me 'the Talk'. Have you had 'the Talk'?"



“Just the basic one at the end of primary school.” Harry replied. “Which could be summed up as ‘Don’t!’ It didn’t really help explain pretty girls creeping into your bed and attacking you.”

She smiled, then replayed his words in her mind. “You think I’m pretty?”

“Of course.” Harry said, as though it were obvious. And to him, it clearly was.

“Thank you, Harry.” Hermione said in a soft, emotion-filled voice, before she shook her head slightly, getting back on track. “Anyway, Mum suggested to me that this point in my life is where I’ll start to undergo quite a few physical changes, and it’s time to start investigating my body.”

“That makes sense.” Harry replied slowly. “Everything’s changing, and you need to keep your knowledge up to date.”

“Exactly.” Hermione beamed. “Then, I started thinking about you. And I suddenly had a wonderful idea.”

Oh, shit! Oh, shit! Oh, shit! Ran rampant through Harry’s brain, then he realised that this was Hermione, his best friend. “Which was...”

“I’ll show you mine... if you show me yours.” She said, smiling innocently at him.

Harry took a moment to think about the proposition. She’d already seen him, two months ago, and, in an odd way, he was eager to see her, too. He knew the basics of the differences between boys and girls, thanks to one of Dudley’s abandoned biology books, and he’d memorised it, as he did with all his books, so he knew the technical names and anatomical maps... but he didn’t know what it looked like, or felt like.

“Okay.” He whispered. He looked up, to see her beaming at him. “Do you want me to go first or second?”

“That’s up to you, Harry.” She said. “But, I want us to promise one thing; no matter what happens, we don’t laugh and we don’t get all embarrassed. We’re both young, and have a lot more growing to do.”

“Agreed.” Harry said, rustling up all his Gryffindor courage, and pulling off his robes. “I’ll go first, then.” Once his robes were gone, he pulled off his tie, casually tossing it onto the desk behind him. With a nearly imperceptible pause, he began to unbutton his shirt.

Hermione tried not to stare, really, she did, but she couldn’t quite tear her eyes away. True, she’d touched Harry before, but that was in a dark and curtained off area, and he’d kept his top on. Now, though, she was gonna see the full show, and she was near-breathless with anticipation.

When his shirt was unbuttoned, he paused again, but began pulling it out from his waist band. Hermione kept her eyes locked on his chest, secretly admiring the smooth skin underneath. Feeling more scared by the minute, Harry kicked off his shoes, before reaching for his belt buckle. He locked eyes with Hermione. “Are you sure?”

“Umm-hmm.” She squeaked, gathering up her own Gryffindor courage. “I’m sure, Harry.” She said after a moment. “Me and you... all the way.”

“All the way.” He repeated back softly, as he unbuckled his belt, and lowered the zip. His trousers dropped to his ankles, before he stepped forward, leaving them on the ground. He quickly pulled off his socks, and stood before Hermione, clad in just his boxer shorts. He looked at Hermione, who nodded softly.

Taking a fortifying breath, he pushed his boxers down, stepped out of them, and stood up straight, his hands resting by his sides. Hermione looked him up and down, before extending a hand slowly. “May I...”

He nodded, bolstering her confidence. She stepped closer, resting a warm, dry hand against his chest. She began to run her fingers across his chest, making him squirm slightly as she brushed over his ribs. She stepped behind him, running both hands over his shoulders, feeling the potential for huge muscles there as he grew older. Her

hands dropped to his kidneys, waiting there for a moment, before they sank a little lower, grabbing hold of the globes of his buttocks.

While she was performing her 'inspection', she was busy taking mental notes. Hmm... he's still small and a bit scrawny, but he has definite potential. He'll never be like Schwarzenegger, but he'll certainly be able to have a swimmer's body if he eats right and exercises. Same with his shoulders... although, those'll be like a draft horse. When her hands trailed over his lower cheeks, she smiled. I swear, by the time he's properly developed, he'll have the female population of this school wanting to kiss him on the cheeks. She carried on, down his thighs, which'll also be bloody strong, and his calves, which will be huge.

She took a deep breath, and crab-walked round him to the front, working her way up from his feet, which are so cute! to his knees, then up his thighs. She stopped for a moment, before reaching up to caress his scrotum. By this point, his happy place had woken up, reaching up to sing to the heavens. It's really quite pretty. I wonder how big he'll be when he's fully developed? She ran her hands over it on both sides, making his shiver slightly, before running her hands over his stomach.

Inspection complete, she stood up slowly, taking a step back. Harry was looking at her, his eyes wide, and a small smile on his face. "So, how am I?" He asked teasingly, but with more than a hint of nervousness.

"V-Very nice." Hermione replied. "When you grow up, with a good diet and plenty of exercise, you'll have a very nice body, Harry."

He blushed, ducking his head slightly. Unfortunately, ducking his head brought his penis into view, and he looked up.

Hermione nibbled on her lip. "Would... would you like me to t-take care of that for you?" She asked.

"It'll... it'll go down on it's own." Harry replied after a moment. He did want her to take care of it, really, 'cause last time felt good, but it felt a bit too... a bit too clinical. He'd wait.

Nodding slowly, a little disappointed, Hermione began to unbutton her robes. "My turn." She said.

"Y-You don't have to." Harry said gallantly. "If you don't want to."

Her hands froze in position as she looked up. "D-Don't... don't you want to s-see?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I do... but, I don't want you to be uncomfortable."

With a small smile, she reached forward, caressing his cheek. "Thanks, Harry. But, I want to. You've shown me yours, it wouldn't be fair if I didn't show you mine."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief, something which helped to bolster her confidence, and also make her heart melt even more in her chest. He's noble... bless, I'll have to help him break that habit, though. Sometimes, it'll do more harm than good. She pulled off her robes, revealing the standard school uniform of blouse, ties, pleated skirt and sweater, with a pair of knee-high grey socks. She kicked off her shoes, pulling off her socks, and then pulling off her jumper.

Her tie was loosened slightly, then pulled over her head, before she started to unbutton her blouse. Harry caught a flash of white fabric as her blouse parted, and had a horrific flashback to doing the laundry at the Dursleys. Fortunately, images of Aunt Petunia's underwear vanished as Hermione pulled off the blouse, revealing pale skin, with a small training bra on.

She tossed the blouse onto the desk, then unbuttoned her skirt, allowing it to puddle onto the floor. She stopped, and looked at him. "Do you want me to take these off... or would you like to?"

Moving instantly into action, Harry stepped forward. "Er... I will... might need you to help though."

With a small giggle (after all, she'd overheard her Mum saying how utterly useless Dad was at taking off her bra), she nodded.

“C-Can... I do the same as you did?” Harry asked timidly. At her nod, he reached out, running his hands over her collar bone, before grazing his hands over her bra.

“It’s at the back.” Hermione whispered, watching him disappear behind her. “It’s a hook and clasp. Take hold of the top piece, and pull it to the side.” She felt the bra tighten for an instant, then release as Harry successfully undid it. Ooh... one-handed, too. Definite potential there, Potter.

His hands reached up to the shoulder straps, gently pushing them down her arms. She held out her hands in front of her, letting the bra fall to the floor, before she rested her hands at her sides, unconsciously mirroring Harry’s pose from earlier.

Instead of instantly coming round to the front, Harry gently ran his hands over her back, tracing the slight grooves left in her skin by the elastic. She gave out a little sigh as his gentle fingers worked the small itch away. His hands continued over her shoulders, the muscles there already showing signs of definition. After all, carrying around ten kilos of heavy books would do that.

His hands traced over her sides, prompting a small giggle, as Harry his arms round her stomach, pulling her into a brief, but very enjoyable full-body hug. She could hear him breathe deeply as he inhaled the scent of her hair, resting his chin on her shoulder for a moment.

“Carry on, Harry.” She whispered gently. As if waiting for the cue, Harry’s arms unfurled, as his hands gently stroked up her chest, brushing lightly over her nipples. She let out a little sigh as he run his hands up and down.

To her shock, Harry didn’t seem to focus on her nipples. She’d read several of her mother’s health magazines, where women wrote in about problems with their love lives, in which they complained their partners didn’t seem to understand breasts. It seemed Harry didn’t have that problem.

His hands slowly drifted down to her waist, taking a gentle hold of the waistband on her panties. He stopped. "Do you want me to carry on?" He whispered nervously into her ear. She trembled when she felt his breath against her earlobe.

"Yes." She breathed shakily. "Please, Harry."

Releasing her waist, Harry pushed the panties down, Hermione feeling his breath on her back as he lowered himself to his knees. She lifted her legs, one at a time, so that Harry could remove the knickers, then stood still.

After a few nervous seconds, Harry's hands began to slowly kneed her butt cheeks, his breath on them, letting her know that his face was quite close. She jerked slightly when she felt his lips kiss each cheek, before his tongue flicked over the cleft.

His hands gently stroked up and down the back of her thighs for a few moment moments, before he placed his hands on her hips, gently prompting her to turn round. Taking a deep breath, Hermione complied, standing in her nakedness in front of Harry.

Being head level to her crotch, Harry kept his eyes locked on her, while his hands ran up and down the front of her thighs, before stopping again on her hips.

"Keep going, Harry." Hermione cajoled after a few moments.

Nodding slowly, Harry began to trace his fingers over his stomach, heading slowly down. Like him, she had no pubic hair to speak of. As his hands touched the edges of her thighs, she moved her feet apart, widening the distance between her thighs. Harry leaned closer, gently running a finger over her opening, making her shudder slightly.

"It's wet." Harry said neutrally. "That's your... that's your Bartholin gland, isn't it?" He asked.

"Y-Yes." She stammered.

Harry leaned closer, breathing in. "And it has a smell."

“Harry!” Hermione took a step back, scowling down at him. “That’s very rude!”

He looked up, a little confused. “What?”

“Saying I smell, Harry!” She snapped.

The confusion remained. “What? My new shoes had a smell. My broomstick polish has a smell. Treacle tart has a smell. Saying that something has a smell doesn’t mean it’s bad.”

Properly chastised, Hermione stepped forward again slowly. “Sorry, Harry. Jumped to conclusions, there. But, ‘smell’ is probably not the best word to describe... that. Saying ‘something smells’ usually implies a bad smell. Perhaps ‘scent’ would be better.”

He nodded. “Okay. It has a scent.” He smiled up at her. “If it’s any consolation, it’s a very nice scent.” He pressed closer and inhaled deeply, making her blush.

“Thanks, Harry.” She smiled warmly at him. “Now, extend your finger... that’s it. Turn your hand over, and press up.” He complied, making her hiss slightly. “You feel that? That little bumpy bit?” He nodded again. “That’s my clitoris, Harry. As my mum described it, ‘every girl’s best friend’. If you s-start...”

She trailed off as Harry’s finger began to rub gently, moving in a circular motion. Like Harry’s first encounter, this was short and sweet, as Harry expertly (How the hell is he this good at it? she wondered idly) manipulated her to a very satisfying orgasm.

Staggering back a step, she grinned at Harry. “That was good...” she sighed happily, only to grin even wider as Harry licked his finger, nodding before sucking on the end. He looked up, noticing her stare and wide grin.

“What?”

“That was actually quite flattering, Harry.” She replied. “When you licked your finger. In polite company, rather grim and disgusting, but it made me feel better.”

Not understanding, he shuffled forward, running his finger over her again, and then sucking on it. “It’s nice. Tastes good and has a nice scent.” He shrugged, before standing up. He wrapped her in a hug, resting his head on her shoulder again as he held her tightly.

Hermione wrapped her arms around him, enjoying the close sensation. “Is this gonna make us weird?” She asked after a few moments.

Harry pulled back slightly, so he could look into her eyes, and rested his forehead against hers. “I hope not. Why should it?”

She shrugged helplessly. “According to Mum, some people get weirded out after stuff like this.”

He pressed a kiss against her cheek, before hugging her tightly again. “Not us.”

“No... not us.” Hermione replied, enjoying the hug. “Now, we should get dressed and head back to the tower.”

Dressing quickly, Harry was about to lead her out of the classroom, and stopped. “You gonna come and bunk with me tonight?”

She cocked her head slightly. “Do you want me to?”

“Every night.” Harry replied. “But, I wasn’t sure if you still would after you went to see your parents.”

She took his hand, squeezing firmly. “Unfortunately, I don’t think we can get away with every night. But, as many as I can, yeah.”

They started walking out together, holding hands. “Good.”

“She’s a whore!” Ron shouted. “You’ve just proved it!”



Instantly, Harry's face changed from introspection to harshness. Gone was amiable Harry, this was Warrior Lord Potter, the Man-Who-Defeated-Voldemort. "Say that again, Weasley, and you won't leave this hall alive!" Ron flinched. "Are we clear?" A moment of silence, before, "Are! We! Clear?"

Ron nodded jerkily, truly terrified of his 'best mate'.

Harry glanced about the Great Hall. "Anyone, and I mean anyone, who denigrates my wife will not survive my wrath. Are we perfectly clear?"

The Hall clamoured yes, none of them wanting to face the true wrath of what was probably the most powerful wizard in the world.

Dumbledore's portrait cleared his throat, the sound echoing throughout the Great Hall. "We didn't actually find out about that until quite a bit later, Harry. May I say, you cost me fifty galleons to Minerva. I didn't think you'd engage in that sort of exploration until the end of your first year."

Harry looked out in the crowd, seeing a rather smug-looking McGonagall.

Snape let out a good-natured snarl. "You think you had it bad, Albus? I lost two hundred to her. I didn't think it would be until the start of your second year. Devious little kitty."

McGonagall snorted. "You lost, Severus. Accept it gracefully. I must admit, I thought it would be later in the year, but before the end of term. So, I won, you both lost, and I particularly enjoyed the holiday, good food and wine that money bought me."

Before Harry could retort, Ron again opened his mouth. "You betrayed me, both of you!" He snapped. "You knew I liked Hermione, Harry, you knew it, and you went and took her! Bloody Potter, always has to have everything, doesn't he?"

"Shut up, Ron." Hermione replied in an icy-cold tone. "You were too late, and your motives aren't exactly pure. Don't worry... we'll come to

you in time. Until then, be silent. Your opinions are neither wanted nor needed.”

Ron turned to Harry. “I’m your best mate!”

“No.” Harry replied neutrally. “Hermione is. And always was, Ron.” He saw Ron open his mouth again. “Hermione’s right, Ron. Shut your gob.” He turned back to the crowd. “Most of that year was pretty straightforward, and you all know most of it. The only other thing we kept confidential was that I began teaching Hermione how to fly.”

“Ha! Another lie!” Ginny sneered. “We all know that the boring bloody bookworm hates flying!”

Harry was about to retort, yet again, that people only ‘knew’ what they knew because they’d been led to believe it, and changed his mind. With his wand, he wrote flaming letters in the air, like he had seen the young Tom Riddle do in the Chamber of Secrets, so many years ago. ‘You only ‘know’ what we wanted you to believe’ floated into the air, growing bigger until each letter was four feet high, and began to bob above the podium.

“I won’t say it again, ‘cause I’m getting bored with saying that. I will tell you this, though; at the end of fifth year, after taking our exams, we had a bit of a break, and we headed over to Puddlemere United’s tryouts. Under special glamours, me and Hermione tried out. I tried out as Mr. Indago, while Hermione tried as Miss Fugo. We-”

“That was you?” Oliver Wood shouted. “Oh, you evil buggers! The entire team loved you two!” He crossed his arms and began to sulk.

“Cheers, Ollie!” Harry called back, smirking when he saw Oliver frown at being called ‘Ollie’. “Anyway, we pissed all over the tryouts, and had we been seventeen, each of us would have been offered a starting spot on the first team, instantly. Hermione’s Quidditch skills far outweigh yours, Miss Weasley.”

“No, they don’t!” Ginny shouted back petulantly. “She’s just a bookworm, who couldn’t fly a broom to save her life!”

The floating letters flashed once, reiterating the message. Harry ignored Ginny, and carried on.

“We carried on with our learning, the pair of us devouring the library. During one of my conversations with Albus, he advised that it would be better if people thought that I was not as intelligent as I am. He said that it would throw our enemies off if they thought I was only an average student.

“Now, he wasn’t asking me to throw my exams or fake substandard homework, but he was asking that when my results came out, that he could post a set of false results for me, while giving me a second copy, with my actual results. This is important later on.

“Myself and Hermione were the top two students in our year, and Ron... seemed to hang around a lot. We could already tell that he was not tremendously bright, inconceivably lazy and rather bigoted, so any allusions to some mythic ‘Golden Trio’ are wildly overrated. By the end of the year, just before the final exams, we got ‘the offer’. The vast majority of you won’t know what this is, so I shall explain.

“The top two or three students of the first year are offered a special end-of-year test, in the form of an obstacle course. It’s designed using all the first year curriculum, to take you through a series of tasks. In our case, it was getting past Fluffy the three-headed dog, a wall of Devil’s Snare, using our newly-gained Herbology skills, grabbing a flying key, both a test of Charms and Flying, bypassing Professor Snape’s potions riddle, which was a combination of potions and logic, and finally, getting past an age-appropriate magical creature.

“Albus offered to let me and Hermione take the course.” Harry looked over at the crowd, spotting the dirty-blond he was looking for. “Luna, didn’t you take it at the end of your first year?”

Luna looked a bit shy at being singled out, but nodded. “Yes, I did. It wasn’t nearly as exciting as yours, though.”

Harry chuckled. “Did you pass it?”

“Of course.” Luna looked a little offended at his question, but was mollified by his ‘sorry’ expression.

“The obstacle course is a closely-guarded secret among the staff. The only people who are aware of it are the Heads of Houses, since they are the ones who select which students will be taking it, the Headmaster, and Hagrid. Each of the students who take the course are sworn to secrecy, so that they can’t reveal the existence of the course. However, it was stopped in fourth year, because of the Tri-Wizard, and with the Ministry’s interference in fifth year, it wasn’t restarted then. Because of Dumbledore’s death at the end of sixth year, which happened before the test could take place, it was cancelled.

“Dumbledore had brought the Philosopher’s Stone to Hogwarts, because he knew that someone was after it. He made a big show about having it hidden somewhere in the castle, telling people to avoid the third floor corridor. Naturally, it wasn’t there.

“Quirrell tried to capture it one night, using a student under the Imperius curse, something which Dumbledore quickly found and stopped, but the stone’s hiding place, on the sixth floor at the time, had been discovered, so Dumbledore moved it, putting it at the end of the obstacle course. After all, it’s a first year test. Why would you hide such an immeasurably powerful object at the end of such a low-level challenge?

“Quirrell, after a bit of snooping, found out that the stone was at the end of the course. So, at the end of term, Albus offered us the course, and suggested the Ron be allowed to join us.” Harry turned to his wife. “I really don’t know why. He bitched and whinged during the whole bloody thing.”

“Wait a minute!” Ron snapped, hauling himself to his feet, yet again, to speak about things that he didn’t understand. The floating letters above the podium began to flash again. “That was us saving the Stone from You-Know-Who! I helped save the school!”

At the back, McGonagall burst out laughing. It took over a minute for her to regain control of herself, then she glared at Ron for his stupidity. "Are you serious?" She asked, before looking up at the stage and holding up a finger, prompting Padfoot's portrait self to fold his arms across his chest and pout.

McGonagall turned back to Ron. "Do you really think that those obstacles were in any way a deterrent to someone of Voldemort's power? Devil's Snare? A flying key? A game of bloody chess? What utter nonsense, Weasley! Those obstacles were perfect for the end-of-first-year test, nothing else."

"No, I helped stop You-Know-Who! That dog alone would have killed us all if we hadn't got past it!"

Shaking her head slowly, McGonagall speared him with another glare. "Do you really think that we'd keep such a large animal at a school full of children without a valid reason or suitable control? The damned animal eats nearly a metric ton of dog food a day. He's here as a guard dog and as a suitable obstacle, nothing more." She pondered for a moment. "That, and Hagrid's obsession with large animals."

"But he would have killed us! That wasn't a test!" Ron shouted, somehow managing to turn even more red.

"The people who fail the test facing Fluffy end up near-licked to death, Weasley. While big and nasty-sounding, he's a complete softy. The gerbils in third year transfiguration are more dangerous than Fluffy."

"No, he's dangerous, and he nearly killed me!" Ron protested, still feeling a need to prove himself as a useful and valid member of the so-called 'Golden Trio'.

Harry cleared his throat. "You know," he drawled, "both myself and Hermione have seen Fluffy, the huge three-headed hellhound, running like hell from this little grey and white tabby cat. That was funny."

Minerva blushed as she remembered during Harry's second year, when Fluffy had come sniffing round while she was patrolling in her

Animagus form. She scratched him on the noses, and hissed menacingly. Fluffy, not being nearly as thick as most people thought, had run like hell from the tiny cat, and been chased through the corridors.

“Anyway...” Harry said slowly, smirking evilly at McGonagall. He turned back to Ron, as a thought struck him. “Ron, don’t you think it was really convenient that Dumbledore just happened to get called to the Ministry that night? And more to the point, why the hell would he fly to London? The man had a Floo connection in his office, and was one of the few people who was authorised to make Portkeys. He didn’t need to fly anywhere.” Sighing, and shaking his head at Ron’s foolishness, he continued the tale. “The three of us went down. We got past the Devil’s Snare thanks to Hermione, I caught the key, and Ron began to order us around for the chess game. After an embarrassing incident involving a Knight, we-”

“I sacrificed myself for you!” Ron shouted. “It was because of me that you and her could carry on!”

“You fell off, Mr. Weasley.” Dumbledore said from his portrait, twinkling merrily. “You did not ‘sacrifice’ yourself. While standing up to shout something offensive at Miss Granger, you slipped backwards, hitting your head. I modified your memories after Mr. Potter explained everything to me, so that you would believe what we wanted you to believe. It was at that point that you proved yourself as a liability to Harry and Hermione, and we took the appropriate steps.”

Harry nodded, suppressing a smirk at Ron’s ‘righteous’ indignation. “After me and Hermione passed through Professor Snape’s potions riddle, we saw Quirrell in the final chamber, and we knew that the game was over. The two of us did what we could to fight him off, but Hermione got caught up in Quirrell’s Incarcerous. Quirrell dragged me over to the mirror, then took off his turban, revealing Voldemort.

“When he touched me, my Mum’s blood protection began to burn him. I didn’t need to hold on to him, a single touch was enough. At that moment, Dumbledore burst into the room, Professors Snape and McGonagall hot on his heels with wands drawn.

“It was at that point that Quirrell’s magical core detonated, causing a massive magical backwash, that knocked me and Hermione down, while making the Professors stagger. Albus used a Portkey to take us directly to the hospital wing...”

Flashback: Hospital Wing, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Saturday, 20th June, 1992 - 18:51

Harry opened his eyes, groaning slightly as the sunlight seemed to burn straight through his retinas, directly into his brain. “Ugh...” He moaned.

Next to him, Hermione stirred slowly, beginning to wake up.

“Ah, you’re awake, Harry.” Dumbledore said quietly, recognising the signs of a truly award-winning headache. “How’re you feeling?”

“Did you get the number of the bus?” Harry asked softly. “Or the drummer who’s using my brain right now?”

A hand appeared from his left, holding a vial of potion. Without bothering to look who it was or check the potion, he threw it back. Instead of the standard ‘I’m going to die from the taste’ feeling, he tasted peach as his headache faded into nothing. A quick glance at his left revealed Snape, who had a look of concern on his face. “Thanks, sir.”

“Better?” Snape asked.

“Much, now.” Harry looked around. “What happened? I remember Quirrell being in the final chamber. He tied Hermione up... Hermione! Is she okay?”

“Quietly.” Hermione’s voice hissed from his right. “Headache... ooh, for some Anadin right now...”

Snape leaned over Harry, passing another vial to Hermione. “I don’t have Anadin, but this should work for you.” He said tenderly.

Hermione swallowed the potion, feeling the headache vanish instantly. "Ah..." She sighed happily. "Thank you, Professor. That's much better."

Dumbledore smiled at the two. "Are you up to hearing what happened, or would you like a bit more time?"

Harry looked at Hermione, who nodded slightly. "I think we're ready now, Professor."

"Good." Dumbledore nodded. "Well, you both successfully completed the obstacle course. Congratulations on that, by the way. The last person who succeeded was your mother, Harry, while her partner, a Mr. Eric Barnsley, Ravenclaw, failed, and she was the first in almost eighty-five years. Well done."

"Thank you, sir." Harry and Hermione intoned in unison.

"With regards to Professor Quirrell, he unfortunately passed away. We didn't know that Voldemort was sharing his mind. Normally, such a thing would be detectable to all three of us, plus the school wards, but it appears that Voldemort was somehow able to hide his presence. We have taken steps to ensure that such a thing does not happen again."

Harry nodded slowly. "Sir... Professor Quirrell sort of... well, he burned, sir, just on me touching him. How's that possible?"

Dumbledore steepled his fingers. "Do you remember, at the beginning of the year, I told you that I had created a set of blood protection shields over the Dursleys house, based on your mother's sacrifice?" Harry nodded. "Those shields don't just work for the house, Harry. You carry the protection within your very skin. That single touch was like being dropped in acid for the possessed Quirrell."

"So... I killed him, sir." Harry concluded, slumping down a little further into his bed.



“No.” Snape said brusquely. Harry and Hermione looked at him. “Think of it in a different light, Harry. Picture the situation as Voldemort riding a bicycle. You destroyed the bicycle, true, but not the person riding it. Professor Quirrell, unfortunately, was dead the instant Voldemort possessed him. He would never have survived. You allowed him to move on to the next great adventure. Do not think that you’ve taken a life, Harry. It’s not true. What you did was release Professor Quirrell from a flesh prison, something he would have thanked you for.”

Harry allowed the words to wash over him, plus the comfort he was drawing from Hermione’s presence. “Thank you, sir.” He said, in a soft voice filled with emotion. “Sir, while I was down in the Chamber, Voldemort said that I’d reduced him to shadow and vapour.” He took a deep breath. “He said that Mum didn’t need to die, that she could have saved herself, if she hadn’t tried to stop him killing me. Why did he want to kill me, sir?”

Dumbledore sighed, taking a moment to think. “I will never lie to you, Harry. And I will never withhold something from you, unless I have a very good reason, and I will explain that reason in detail.” He looked at McGonagall, who nodded. “The very basic reason is that Voldemort learned of a prophecy, detailing his defeat. He wished to make certain that didn’t happen, so he attacked your parents.”

“Do you know the prophecy, sir?” Harry asked.

“I do, Harry. It is a terrible burden to bear, and I wish strongly that you did not have to bear it. At the moment, you do not need to know what it is. I would suggest that take the time to enjoy your childhood before allowing this sort of burden.” He waited for a moment, then carried on. “If you really wish to know, Harry, ask me again, and I shall tell you.”

Hermione pressed a hand onto his arm. “Harry, maybe you should wait for a while. I mean, you’ve only been back in the Wizarding world for less than a year, and from what you told me about your relatives, they don’t exactly provide a suitable child-raising atmosphere. Like Professor Dumbledore said, maybe you should enjoy your childhood for a bit before hearing it.”

Dumbledore nodded. "The offer is always open, Harry. When you wish to know, tell me, and I shall reveal the precise details to you."

Harry nodded. "Thank you, sir."

"There's something else we wish to discuss with you, Harry," McGonagall said. "Now that Voldemort has made a reappearance, and this is his first showing in nearly ten years, it's time to begin training the younger generation to protect themselves. We have the feeling that both you and Hermione will be on the front-lines of the upcoming war. As such, we'd like to offer you some more advanced training, so that you will be ready."

Hermione narrowed her eyes slightly. "Why do you think we'll be on the front-lines?" She asked shrewdly.

McGonagall smiled. "My dear Hermione, I've known you for ten months. I can safely say that, if you perceive an injustice, you will fight it, with all that you are. Am I wrong in my assessment?"

"No." Hermione admitted grumpily.

"And you, Mr. Potter. You leapt into battle to save a girl you barely knew, against an enemy you knew nothing about."

"True." Harry agreed. "So, what kind of things will we be learning?"

The teachers exchanged glances. "To be frank, Harry," Snape said slowly, "there's a whole host of things we could teach you. Your seven core subjects, begin work on the third year electives, combat magicks, Mind Arts, Animagus training... there's a huge range of information. One very valid question is, do you want to spend all summer in the company of a bunch of old farts learning?"

"Yes!" Hermione said instantly, making Dumbledore snicker.

"I am not an 'old fart', Severus!" McGonagall snapped. "Behave yourself. You're not too old to put across my knee!"

“Promises, promises.” Snape drawled silkily, making McGonagall’s stern expression crack as she chuckled.

“What about you, Harry?” McGonagall asked.

“Anything to keep me away from my relatives, Professor.” Harry replied.

“Ah, yes.” Dumbledore leaned forward. “About that, Harry. The blood protection wards on Privet Drive require you to be there, but not for the full summer. You can spend most of the day away from the property and sleep there, or vice versa. Ideally, eight to twelve hours per day for four weeks would be sufficient to recharge the protections. At the moment, we can allow them to stay at about seventy-five percent, since Voldemort is not nearly strong enough to penetrate them.”

“So, I need to either sleep there, or spend the day there.” Harry concluded.

“Yes, Harry.” Dumbledore replied. “Now, the question then becomes, where will you spend the rest of the time? Normally, we do not permit students to stay at Hogwarts over the summer, for several reasons. There is a lot of cleaning that needs doing, plus we tend to fumigate the whole castle, removing any vermin, while there are no students present. Not to mention, most of the teachers take holidays away, which would mean there are very few people around to talk to, and none your own age.”

“Sir...” Hermione spoke up, “I told my parents about Harry back at Christmas. They know he’s an orphan, and that he lives with... not very nice people. Isn’t there a way for him to live somewhere else?”

Dumbledore sighed. “I truly wish there were, Miss Granger. Ten years ago, when the Potters passed away, many magical families came forward, offering to adopt Harry. However, the law states that, since he still has blood-kin, that he must be placed with them.”

Harry shuddered lightly. “Plus, half of those families would try and use me. People like the Malfoys would love to be connected with me.

Drain my vault, and use my fame. In a perverse way, I'd rather be with Aunt Petunia than them."

"Yes." Dumbledore said heavily. "I, too, was concerned over some of the people who wished to take you in. The Malfoys, the LeStranges, the Carrows... all families with a history of Dark activity. I will admit that I was pleased to be able to deny them."

"I wonder if Mum and Dad would let you stay with us." Hermione mused. "I mean, I already told Mum about you, and what we've done, and she didn't seem to be annoyed, plus, she knows we've shared a bed, and I can't believe I just said that in front of three professors." She closed her eyes in defeat. "Bugger..."

"Language, Hermione." McGonagall said, amused. "We already knew about you two sharing a bed. We didn't stop it, since you two have behaved and you have a close friendship. You both seem to be better people since you started snuggling, and we have no problem with that. I will have to insist, however, that you are not caught. If it becomes public knowledge that we allow this, we'll spend all night every night chasing people back to their own beds."

Both youths blushed as McGonagall casually described their sharing a bed, but gave small smiles at being allowed to continue.

"Miss Granger, assuming that your parents would be willing to allow Mr. Potter house room, would you be willing to allow him to stay with you?" Dumbledore asked.

"Well, I'd need to write to them, sir." Hermione said. "But, I don't think they'll have a problem with it."

Dumbledore thought for a moment. "Do your parents have a telephone?"

"Yes, sir. Of course."

"And do you know the number off the top of your head?"

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Yes, sir. Is there a phone here at Hogwarts?"

"No." Snape replied. "Electronics don't work here, because of the ambient magic in the air. Anything with an electronic circuit goes haywire. We can, however, apparate or take a Portkey to a Muggle area, and telephone your parents from there."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "You know about phones, sir? How? I didn't think wizards bothered with Muggle technology."

Snape saw Harry's eyebrow, and raised him a slight sneer. "Anyone who disregards technology without weighing up it's benefits is a fool, Harry. Just because I am a wizard doesn't mean that I don't have Muggle friends. I call them, since it's far quicker than a letter."

"Somehow, sir, I can't picture you with a telephone." Harry chuckled.

"It would solve our problems." Dumbledore said. "If you would care to get dressed," he noticed the two looking shyly at each other, "separately, or together, if you prefer, then we would be able to take a Portkey to King's Cross station, and make the telephone call from there. We could then apparate to your parents' house to speak in person."

The two looked at each other and nodded, clambering out of the bed. The teachers quickly disappeared as a privacy screen materialised, allowing them to get dressed. While the two were changing, McGonagall held out her hand to the two men. "Pay up. They've obviously seen each other before."

With a pout, Snape reached into his robes, pulling out a heavy sack of gold. He passed it across, before folding his arms and scowling at Minerva.

Dumbledore coughed softly. "It's in my office, Minerva. We'll collect it after we return." She smiled at him, before tucking the sack into her robes, and smiling smugly at Snape.

A moment later, the privacy screen parted, as Harry and Hermione reappeared, dressed in their school uniforms, minus the robes. "We didn't wear the robes, sir," Hermione said, "since our school uniforms are very similar to Muggle ones."

"Good thinking, Miss Granger." Dumbledore said. "Now, with a little bit of wand work..." He waved his wand over Snape, changing his robes into a plain black suit, with a white shirt and a black tie.

Harry glanced at Hermione, who nodded with a grin. "Professor Snape, could I make a suggestion?"

"Of course."

"Sweep your hair back, like Malfoy does, and put it into a pony tail." Harry said. Snape complied, flicking his wand over his head, and conjuring a small tie, which he quickly fastened. "Now," Harry continued, "you need a pair of sunglasses."

McGonagall conjured a pair of basic black sunglasses, small and fashionable, which Snape slipped onto his nose. He marshalled his expression into neutrality.

"Perfect, sir." Harry said, smiling. "You look cool."

"Thank you." Snape replied, crossing his arms and looking down at them.

"Very cool." Hermione added.

Dumbledore's wand flicked over McGonagall, changing her tartan robes into a black suit, with a knee length skirt. Again, a white blouse and a black ladies' tie completed the ensemble. She conjured another pair of sunglasses, mirroring Snape's pose.

"This is gonna be cool!" Hermione exclaimed. "It's like Men in Black!  
(1)"

“I’m not sure I would be a suitable third.” Dumbledore said, changing his star-spangled robes into a plain grey suit, with a matching tie. “However, I believe this should be sufficient.”

Harry looked at him intently. “It seems really weird seeing you without a hat, sir.” He said.

“Indeed.” Dumbledore chuckled, before pulling a pen from his suit pocket. “Portus.” He intoned, before holding out the pen. “This is a Portkey, a form of magical transportation. If you would put your finger on it, we will be arriving at King’s Cross in a few moments.”

The five people crowded round the pen, managing to touch it slightly. “Activate.” Dumbledore said firmly, and in a blink, the hospital wing was empty again.

The quintet landed neatly on their feet on platform 9¾. Snape and McGonagall volunteered to wait on the magical platform, watching Dumbledore, Hermione and Harry pass through the barrier onto the Muggle side. At the end of the platform, a bank of telephones waited.

As Hermione entered, she slapped her hand against her forehead. “Oh, I forgot to bring my purse!”

Dumbledore held out a hand, on which a dozen shiny ten pence pieces rested. “Permit me, Miss Granger.”

“Thanks, sir.” Taking one of the coins (2), she fed one into the slot, and quickly tapped out the number.

“Mum!” Hermione called out. “Hi... no, I’m not in trouble... well, I’m in London at the moment... yes, you could call it a field-trip, I suppose... of course I’m not on my own! I’m with Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall and Snape... yes, Harry’s here, too... how did you know? That doesn’t matter at the moment, Mum... yes, I did... that, too... yes, I think he enjoyed it... Anyway, the Professors want to know if we can come over and speak to you... yes, it’s about Harry... hang on, I’m getting the beeps.” She turned round, absently noticing that Dumbledore was still holding out the coins.

She quickly fed another one into the machine. "Right, I'm back now... yes, tonight... well, they didn't just want to turn up at the door without ringing first, did they? Okay, I'm sorry... so, is it okay if we pop round? Well, the back garden's enclosed, and as long as the nosy witch from number 7's not peeking through her curtains, it should be fine... no, she's not one of us, just a nosy old bag... yes, I'm sure... no, seriously, not even a witch would wear those slippers... okay, a couple of minutes, Mum... Thanks... Love you, too. Bye."

She hung up, and backed out of the call box. "They said that's fine. If you can arrange it, we can arrive in the back garden, it's enclosed on all sides."

Dumbledore nodded. "Perhaps we should continue this discussion on our side of the barrier." He led the group back through the portal onto platform 9¾. "The best way, Miss Granger, would be if you were able to guide us. Have you heard of apparition?"

"Yes, sir." Hermione replied.

"Do you understand the basic premise of how it works?"

"Not really, sir. Most of the books about it were listed in the restricted section of the library, so I couldn't read them."

"Ah." Dumbledore nodded. "Very well. The basic premise of apparition is that you tap into your magical core, summoning the power. Then, using mental discipline, you create an apparition field around yourself, in essence turning your body into highly charged magical energy. While the field is forming, it is necessary to picture your destination, and use the energy to create a directional energy signature. Once the direction is set and the apparition field created, you vanish, travelling to the other side."

Hermione nodded slowly. "I understand the concept, sir." She said diplomatically.

Dumbledore chuckled. "Yes. Now, I can certainly apparate, as can Severus and Minerva, and we can take you wish us by a process



known as 'side-along apparition'. However, we do not know where we are going, exactly. So, we will need you to guide us."

Harry looked a little confused by the process, so he tried to get it straight in his mind. "So, you're going to turn all five of us into energy, while Hermione magically tells us where to go, and you then take us there?"

"A succinct and accurate summary." Snape said. "I'd say 'five points to Gryffindor', but I'd never hear the end of it."

"So, Miss Granger, if you would take hold of my arm, and Harry's... that's it. And Severus and Minerva will take hold of Harry's other arm... Now, picture very clearly, Miss Granger, your back garden. Find us a nice empty spot to land... Do you have it?"

Hermione nodded, her eyes scrunched closed.

"Excellent. Severus, Minerva?"

The five vanished with a loud 'crack'.

As they arrived in Crawley, Mrs. Emma Granger opened the back door, spotting her daughter, a young man, two Men in Black, and what was clearly the Headmaster stepping forward.

Hermione dashed into her mother's arms, wrapping her in an effusive hug. "Hi, Mum!" She said quickly. "I missed you."

Harry watched the reunion with undisguised longing. He'd never had an encounter like that, and simply ached inside. McGonagall placed a hand on his shoulder. "I think I understand how you feel, Harry." She said softly. "I lost my parents when I was young, but even that cannot compare to never knowing them."

He nodded slowly. "It's just... I've heard people complaining about their families. Ron Weasley, for example. He complains that he's got so many brothers and a sister. I'd hack off a testicle for just one sibling."

Emma looked up at hearing the word 'testicle'. "Harry Potter, I assume?"

"Yes, ma'am." Harry said, stepping forward and holding out his hand. "I'm pleased to meet you, Mrs. Granger."

Taking his hand, Emma pulled Harry into a loose hug, holding on for a moment. "The pleasure's mine, Mr. Potter. And please, call me 'Emma'."

"Yes, ma'am." Harry replied. "And call me 'Harry', ma'am." He quailed under her mock-glare. "Sorry... Emma."

"Won't you all come in?" She led the party into the living room, where a man was sitting, snoring gently under a newspaper.

"Wake up!" Emma swatted the man on the back of his head, forcing him to wake up with a jerk.

"Wha... Em? What's up... hello, Hermione. What are you doing here?" He looked around the room, easily spotting her fellow student, and a trio of older people. "What did I miss?"

"If you weren't snoozing underneath your paper, you'd have found out." Emma replied.

The man's eyes locked onto Harry. "Let's see... bit short, messy black hair, glasses... logic dictates you, sir, are Harry Potter."

"Er... yes." Harry held out his hand. "It's nice to meet you, sir."

Not holding out his hand, the man leaned a little closer. "You wanna see my shotgun, kid?"

Harry blinked nervously, not noticing Snape, Dumbledore and McGonagall subtly reach for their wands. "No, sir. I don't think so..."

The man smiled, taking Harry's hand. "Relax, Harry. I'm just teasing. I'm Daniel Granger, please feel free to call me 'Dan'."

“Er...” Harry glanced at Hermione, who was glaring at her father.

“Daddy!” She scolded. “Didn’t I say that you have to be nice to him?”

It seemed even her father was intimidated by the potent force that was Hermione Granger. “I’m sorry, sweetie. It’s every father’s job to threaten any possible suitors. It’s in the contract and everything.”

“Behave, Dan, or you’ll be on the sofa tonight.” Emma said firmly.

“Yes, dear.” Dan sighed. He turned back to Harry. “Being young, Harry, you won’t understand that it’s a father’s job to make sure his baby girl is looked after. I’m sorry if I upset you.”

“T-That’s okay, sir.” Harry replied timidly. “I... okay, sir.”

Dumbledore cleared his throat. “I apologise for our intrusion. I am Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts. This is Severus Snape, professor of potions, and my deputy Headmistress, Minerva McGonagall.”

“Yeah, we met Professor McGonagall last year.” Dan said. “You came to deliver Hermione’s letters.”

“I did.” McGonagall confirmed. “May we assume that you do not wish to show Mr. Potter your shotgun?”

Dan suddenly blanched as he noticed that all three of the magical adults were holding onto the handles of their wands. “Er... I don’t actually own a shotgun.” He sighed with relief as the wizards and witch finally released their wands. “Would you care to sit down?”

After everyone was sat, and the required tea and biscuits produced, Hermione launched straight into her speech. “Mum, Dad, I was hoping that we’d be able to let Harry stay here during some of the summer.”

“Well, that was certainly... blunt.” Dan said. “Er... forgive me if this sounds a bit rude, but... why?”

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "There are several reasons, Mr. Granger. The first is that young Harry and his family are not on the best of terms. They, like yourselves, are non-magical. However, they are not... tolerant to Harry's powers. As such, he does not reside in a comfortable family environment. Second, both he and your daughter have expressed an interest in spending a good portion of the summer holidays performing advanced studies, and it would be beneficial if they were learning together."

"Summer school?" Emma asked her daughter. "I'm sure you've already been doing more than you should, sweetie."

Hermione blushed prettily. "Just a little."

Harry coughed noisily, cocking an eyebrow at Hermione, which quickly finished when she jabbed her elbow in his ribs.

Emma looked at Hermione sharply, who dropped her gaze. "Sorry, Harry." Hermione muttered.

"So, you'd like Harry to stay here." Emma repeated back. "Well, we certainly have room for your friend to stay." During the sentence, she kept her eyes on her daughter, who quickly looked up. Emma nodded slowly, as she realised the guest bedroom wouldn't be necessary. "Do you know what dates he'll be staying?"

Dumbledore grimaced slightly. "That's, er... that's actually a bit difficult to explain. By staying at his relatives' house for a certain length of time each year, Harry charges up a series of wards and protections on the property."

"Wards?" Dan asked.

Hermione stepped in. "Picture Star Trek, Daddy. If Harry's house was the ship, the wards would be the equivalent of the shields."

"Ah. Okay. Got it." He replied gratefully. "So, Harry needs to stay with his family to recharge the shields, then he can come and stay with us, right?"

“Er... not as such.” Dumbledore replied. “Harry will need to spend a certain amount of time, 8-12 hours a day at Privet Drive. The rest of the time, he will be free to spend time elsewhere.”

Dan cocked an eyebrow. “Where’s Privet Drive?”

“Little Whinging, Surrey, sir.” Harry replied.

Letting out a low whistle, Dan shook his head. “That’s a hell of a lot of driving, Headmaster. That’s what, 80, 90 miles round trip? Twice a day...”

“Transport will not be an issue, Mr. Granger.” Dumbledore said. “I will be able to furnish both Harry and Hermione with appropriate devices for transportation.”

“So, he’ll just need room and board?” Emma asked. “I’m sure we can manage that. We’ve not actually planned on a holiday this year; we were waiting ‘til Hermione got home before we made any decisions.”

Dumbledore sighed in relief. “That would be marvellous, Mrs. Granger. I, and my staff, thank you from the bottom of our hearts. Now, with regards to Harry’s staying, he will either need to spend a day or a night a Privet Drive per 24 hour period.”

Dan nodded. “So, he either spends the day here with us and goes home, or he kips here and spends the day at home.”

“In a word, yes.” Dumbledore replied. “This will need to happen for four weeks, then he is free to spend the time wherever he likes.”

“Sounds fine to us.” Dan said, after looking at his wife, who nodded. “So, what was this about extra training... and what will it cost us?”

Dumbledore reached into his robes, pulling out a piece of parchment. “I’ll answer your second question first, Mr. Granger; the answer is ‘nothing’. We shall volunteer our time free of charge. The answer to the first question is a little more complex.” He handed over the sheet of parchment. “This is a list of core subjects, electives, and ‘special’ studies available by the staff at Hogwarts.”

The three Granger and Harry crowded round the parchment, reading through.

Core Studies:

Astronomy

Charms

DADA

Herbology

History of Magic

Potions

Transfiguration

Electives:

Ancient Runes

Arithmancy

Care of Magical Creatures

Divination

Muggle Studies

'Special' Studies:

Advanced Flight

Animagi

Apparition

Detection

Duelling

Headship Prep.

Healing

Legilimency

Magical First Aid

Occlumency

Portkey Creation

Prefect Training

Dumbledore continued. "Harry and Hermione will be able to select what they wish to study, and I will then arrange the appropriate tutor to call at your home for the training. Again, this will not cost you anything."

Dan read the list. "I don't recognise half of these words."

"I'm sure Miss Granger already knows what these subjects are." Snape said, speaking for the first time since he arrived. "However, some of the activities are legally age-restricted, such as apparition and Portkey creation, while others will be hampered by the ages of the children, such as Animagus training. However, training in these subjects will serve both children very well as they grow older."

"This seems like a lot of work." Emma said. "I mean, you've just finished a full year of schooling, and you look to be signing up for more."

Dumbledore again cleared his throat. "We're not suggesting that Mr. Potter or Miss Granger devote their entire summer to extra studies. Perhaps a few hours per day, five days per week. Maybe a morning lesson, or an evening lesson. Obviously, some subjects can be solely reading assignments, such as History of Magic, while in others, like Herbology, we could only cover theory-based work."

Emma looked at Hermione. "It's fine by us, sweetie. Just as long as you remember to have fun during the holiday. There's more to life than studying. Maybe even a holiday." She turned to Harry. "You're welcome to join us, Harry."

"Thank you, ma'am." He corrected himself at her glare. "Emma. I'm sorry. So, how about we start with..."

Harry took another drink of his water. "And that's how it began. I started spending time at Hermione's place, kipping with her with her parents' permission. And we began studying. Dumbledore modified Ron's memory, so that he'd think that his 'help' with dealing with Quirrellmort was beneficial, instead of bumbling his way through. I'd made five very good friends; Hagrid, Albus, Severus, Minerva and, of course, Hermione.

"I'd faced Voldemort again and survived. But, we all knew that just being able to survive wouldn't be enough. There was more to learn. I had arrangements made to have an enjoyable summer, and we began studying. But, both me and Hermione could feel that there was

more coming... something on the horizon. So, we worked our arses off. And none of us were expecting what came next.”

#### Author's Note:

(1) Yes, I am perfectly aware that Men In Black wasn't released until 1997, but then again, this is not a documentary; I'm allowed to manipulate the timeline since this is fiction.

(2) A quick note; back in 1992, the GBP (pound) was very strong in the economy, worth almost 2.00 at the time. That would make a standard telephone call 10p, or 20¢. Of course, now (2008), you need to put four times as much into a public phone to make it work (robbing bastards...)



## – CHAPTER TWO –

School Year: 1992-1993

The Great Hall, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Saturday, 1st August, 1998

Hermione took a drink of water from Harry's glass, looking over the crowd, who were sitting enthralled. "Before we continue with our tale, does anyone have any questions?" She spotted at least three Weasleys taking a deep breath to rant. "That doesn't come from a Weasley."

Rita Skeeter stood up. "I do. All records indicate that Potter was an average student, as best. Are you telling us that those records are false?"

Nodding slowly, Hermione answered. "The records that were posted were fabrications. We knew, even then, that the Death Eaters were still around, and a lot of them believed that Voldemort would return, and when he did, he'd be gunning for Harry. So, with Harry's permission, Albus published less than complimentary records for Harry. The end of first year, me and Harry were the top two students, outclassing everyone in our year by quite a margin." Rita nodded, making a note as she sat down. Seeing no other questions, Hermione continued with the tale.

"During that summer, Harry spent most of the day with his relatives, doing their bloody chores for them, and spent evenings and nights with me at my house. Professor Dumbledore gave us each a present."

Harry held up his left arm, where a slightly battered wrist watch was wrapped. Hermione held up her right, where a slightly more feminine watch was. "These watches were enchanted with Portkeys. They were both programmed to go from Harry's bedroom at Privet Drive to my bedroom in Crawley. I could go and visit Harry, if I needed to, and did occasionally spend a night with him at Privet Drive."

Percy stood up, his parchment and quill in hand. "Are you saying that Dumbledore gave you both permanent Portkeys? To be used whenever you wished?" At Hermione's nod, Percy scribbled another note. "This will be an extensive list of charges..." He muttered as he wrote, before looking up. "Issuing Portkeys to minors, without appropriate supervision, is against Ministry law, and is a fineable offense."

"Oh, shut up, Weatherby!" Harry snapped. "Don't speak about things you don't understand."

Hermione cleared her throat, glaring at Percy, who sat down meekly. "Continuing with the tale. During that summer, we worked primarily on book-based skills, as well as training in Occlumency. We spent some time with Professor Vector, reading about Arithmancy, since that's a very useful course. We began reading ahead for Defence Against the Dark Arts, Charms, Transfiguration, and Potions. Since Potions is such an easy topic to practice in a Muggle house, we did so."

Harry chuckled. "Yeah, going into the kitchen one morning to find four cauldrons on the gas stove. I thought your Mum was gonna kill us."

Percy again hauled himself to his feet. "You're saying that you were practicing magic during the summer? Violating the Statute of Secrecy by performing in front of Muggles, as well as the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery. Is that correct?"

"No, Weatherby." Harry sighed. "We were working under tutors, which is perfectly allowed under the Decree, and we were performing magic in the presence of Hermione's parents, who were perfectly aware of the Magical world, not violating the Statute."

"The law applies to everyone, Potter." Percy snapped. "You were violating the law. Your wand should have been snapped, your memories Obliviated, your family assets seized by the Ministry and you being returned to your family!" He made a few more notes. "When these charges are drawn up, I will have to recommend that course of action."

Not bothering to deal with the pompous little arsewipe, Harry just turned back to Hermione, nodding at her to continue.

“At the time, we didn’t know that Dobby was intercepting Harry’s mail. How could we? Harry wasn’t that close to Ron, so wasn’t expecting a letter, and I didn’t bother to write to him, since I pretty much saw him every day at my house, and spent most nights sleeping with him.

“When Dobby turned up at Privet Drive during one of the Dursleys’ dinner parties, he set off the Underage detector at Privet Drive, prompting Mafalda Hopkirk to send him a warning letter. That warning was on his file for, what? A day?”

Harry nodded. “About that. When I got to Hermione’s later that night, I spoke to Professor Snape, who told Dumbledore, who went to the Ministry and explained. Hopkirk went back and checked, noticing that it wasn’t actually a wand signature that’d been detected, but a rather crude parody of one. The warning was removed from my record there and then.

“I got a letter from Ron Weasley, stating that he hadn’t heard from Harry, and showed it to him. Harry knew that the Weasleys would be coming to help him ‘escape’ from his relatives. Naturally, we didn’t want this. If Harry was staying at the Burrow, he wouldn’t be able to Portkey across to my house, nor would we be able to continue our summer learning.

“Professor Dumbledore advised that there wasn’t really a way we could stop Mrs. Weasley, without arousing suspicion about our training.”

Dumbledore’s portrait spoke up. “Yes... If Molly knew that I was assisting with the additional training, she would do one of two things; insist her children be allowed to join, or would simply stop it, by making complaints to all the wrong people, forcing the information into the daylight. We decided that Harry would take a short break, while Hermione continued to read ahead and make notes, that she’d be able to share with Harry upon his return to Hogwarts.”

"That was a horrible month." Harry sighed. "Having to spend my days and nights without my Hermione. No hugs, no snuggles... just the chainsaw massacre of a full complement of Weasleys."

"So, the Weasleys turned up after a few days to 'break' Harry out, which we both knew wasn't necessary. When he got to the Burrow, he wrote me a letter, stating that he was there. Whenever Ron wasn't around to try and force him into playing chess, or Quidditch, or just loitering, Harry would carry on with his reading."

Molly clambered to her feet. "This is utter rubbish! When Harry turned up at the Burrow, he was so thin, clearly starved! Your parents must not have fed him!"

Hermione's eyebrow shot up, as a noticeable coolness spread on her face. "Harry ate a carefully balanced diet while at my parents' house. He'd get dinner and breakfast with us if he slept over, or breakfast and a big lunch if he didn't. Harry gained weight by eating properly. Both of us were exercising, maintaining perfectly balanced bodies. A regime you nearly broke by constantly feeding Harry far too much fatty, unhealthy food, without any consideration." She sniffed disdainfully at Molly. "Harry, kindly, paid my parents for his food and board while there."

"He never-" Molly started.

"Silence!" Harry bellowed, gaining instant compliance. "Should I point out that you effectively kidnapped me? Or should I point out that I never paid you, Mrs. Weasley, but that doesn't mean I didn't pay for food and board."

Arthur cleared his throat, next to his wife. "He provided me with a suitable stipend for taking care of him, Molly." He said quietly. "I tried to refuse, but Harry told me that if I didn't accept it, he would leave instantly."

"How much?" Molly demanded instantly, her eyes lighting up with greed.

“That’s not important.” Arthur replied, a little embarrassed at her obvious display.

“Tell me!”

“I paid three galleons a week, Mrs. Weasley.” Harry announced from the stage.

“That’s it?” Molly looked up incredulously. “After all the hard work and effort I put in to making your stay comfortable, you insult us with such an pitiful offer?”

Harry looked round the room, noting that people seemed to be a little uncomfortable with the situation. “Since it’s apparent we’re going to be breaking with the Weasleys, I will answer this. According to Arthur, your entire family’s weekly shopping bill was less than four galleons per week. You don’t have gas, water, council tax or electric bills, no TV licence, so they were not a factor. In short, in terms of actual expense occurred by my presence, I severely overpaid during my time there.” He dismissed Molly with a glare.

“Also during that month, I was subjected to Ginny staring at me hungrily at every opportunity. I could see the wheels turning in her head.” He shuddered. “That was a very uncomfortable month, let me tell you.”

Hermione smoothly carried on with the tale. “When we went to do our shopping at Diagon Alley for second year, Harry and the Weasleys went to Gringotts to collect some money. Harry later told me that, when they got to his vault, he could feel the greed from the Weasleys at seeing a vault full of coin. It was at that point, probably, that Molly started to plan.

“Ron would have to get closer to Harry, obviously. Not just friends, but a best friend/brother type of bond. Ginny would become the future wife of the ‘Boy-Who-Lived’, gaining access to those vaults so that the Weasleys would be comfortable. Harry spotted the basic gist of the plan instantly.

“So, myself and Harry met up in Diagon Alley. As soon as I saw him, I dragged him into the alleyway between Flourish and Blotts and the Apothecary to... say hello.” She smiled, sighing happily as she remembered that reunion, while Harry smirked.

“So, with puffy lips, messed up hair, a couple of hickeys each, not to mention rumpled and damp underwear, we came out, going into Flourish and Blotts. We had the incident with Malfoy, which all of us know and remembered. However, while Arthur and Lucius were fighting, me and Harry snuck away, to do a little shopping of our own. Harry, bless his little cotton socks, bought me an invisibility cloak of my own, so I wouldn’t need to keep using his to sneak into his dorm, and a broomstick, so I could continue with my flying.”

“He bought you a broom?” Ron demanded. “Why? He’s never bought me a broom!”

Ginny pouted. “Nor me.”

“And why should I?” Harry asked. “Ron, you were a jealous, money-hungry git, and Ginny, all I’d seen of you was a red face and a squeak. You weren’t my friend, and you certainly weren’t worth my buying you a Cleansweep Six.”

“That’s not even a decent broom!” Ron protested.

“Not for Quidditch, Weasley.” Hermione said primly. “But five years ago, it was an excellent broom for training chasers. Good lord, your brothers were on Cleansweep 5’s during that year. A Cleansweep 6 was damned good for a neophyte flier. Harry actually wanted to buy me a Nimbus 2001, since that was top of the range, but I put my foot down. I even, somehow, managed to resist the pout and puppy-dog eyes.”

“Again, we had another fumble before we parted ways, and I went home, alone. I waited at 9¾ for him, but he never turned up, and the train left without him.”

Harry sighed. “Yes... thanks to having to wait for the Weasleys, we weren’t able to get onto the train. I suggested to Ron that we just

send Hedwig to school, and someone would come and collect us. Ron, however, didn't like the idea of just waiting around. It wasn't 'Gryffindor' enough for him, so he physically dragged me into that bloody car, and we flew to Hogwarts." He glared lightly at Ron. "Had the silly bloody idiot been thinking, he might have remembered that he didn't know how to drive! Of course, thinking was never Ron's point of view.

"During the drive, I wrote a quick note to Professor Dumbledore, stating that Ron had dragged me into his car, and that we were coming in that way. I also explained that there was a very good chance we'd been spotted, since Ron's not exactly sensible enough to drive to a secluded spot before taking off, and that there was a good possibility of crashing. Hedwig set off and brought it straight to Hogwarts."

"When we got back to Hogwarts, Professor Snape pulled us aside..."

Flashback: Severus Snape's Office, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Tuesday, 1st September, 1992

"You were seen!" He hissed, holding up a special copy of the Daily Prophet. "By no less than seven Muggles!" He slammed the paper onto the desk. "Explain yourself, Weasley!"

"Sir... we couldn't get through the barrier, sir."

"So, you thought to steal a..." Snape trailed off at a knock on his door. "Come in."

The door opened, revealing McGonagall and Dumbledore. For a moment, Dumbledore just stared at the two of them. "Please explain why you did this." He said slowly, softly.

Ron explained quietly about not being able to pass through the barrier, and the urgent need to get to school.

"I shall decide your punishment later, Weasley." McGonagall said. "The Sorting ceremony is about to begin. We had to put it on hold while students were missing. That will be fifty points from Gryffindor, and a week's worth of detentions to be held with Mr. Filch. Now, get out, and go to your dormitory."

Ron trailed off, the tips of his ears a fiery red, displaying his great anger.

As soon as the door shut, the three teachers relaxed. Dumbledore slumped into a chair. "What actually happened, Harry?"

"Well, sir. The portal did seal itself, just as we were about to pass through. We were already running dead late 'cause we had to go back to the Burrow three times to pick up stuff they'd forgotten." He shook his head in annoyance. "As soon as we realised it was 11 o'clock, I said that we should just send an owl, and someone could come and pick us up. Ron grabbed my trunk and Hedwig's cage, and physically dragged me into the car. The sneaky git even locked the door so I couldn't get out. Then, he just took off. I couldn't really stop him, without causing a rather messy scene." He shrugged. "Well, probably no more messy than what actually happened."

"Allow me to clarify." Snape said, his sneers and foul demeanour vanishing the instant Ron was out of the door. "He physically sealed you in the car, and just took off?"

"Yes, sir. As soon as I could, I sent Hedwig on with a note, explaining the situation. I really didn't see a way to stop him without starting a fistfight in the middle of the Muggle train station, and we'd be pretty hard pressed to explain all our magic items, or stunning him, which would break the Statute of Secrecy."

McGonagall sighed. "Yes... truly a rock and a hard place, Harry. You're right; your attempts to stop him could have caused more trouble." She looked at Snape. "Severus?"

"Fifty points from Gryffindor for your stupidity, Potter!" He snarled, then grinned and looked at McGonagall, who smiled.



“That will be fifty points to Gryffindor for moral fibre, Harry. You tried, and you prevented a worse disaster.”

Harry looked confused. “Er... why did you just take points if you’re going to put them straight back on?”

Snape grinned. “One of the fundamental truths of the magical world is that words have power, and magic enforces the things that you say. Now you can say, with one hundred percent truth and accuracy, that ‘the greasy git’ took fifty points from you as well. All you are doing is omitting what happened afterwards.” He smirked. “Of course, I’m sure Weasley won’t bother to investigate.”

Realisation struck, and Harry grinned. “Yes, sir. You’re a true Slytherin, sir.”

“Yes.” Snape said proudly. “Yes, I am. May I just say, had it been intentional, that would have been an exceptional prank to play.”

“Severus.” Dumbledore said sternly. “Don’t encourage him.”

“Come on, Albus.” Snape retorted. “You know, as well as I, that he has a legacy to uphold.”

“Yes, but not until at least his fourth year, Severus.” McGonagall said. “You remember the rules as much as I do.”

“Rules?” Harry asked.

“Er... conversation for another time, Harry.” Snape said sharply. “Sunday morning, for our usual history meeting?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I would suggest that you attend the feast. Naturally, you are ‘forbidden’ from attending.” Dumbledore raised his wand, casting a notice-me-not charm, before adding a little flick. “There. The only people who will notice you now are the three of us, plus Miss Granger. I’m sure she saved you a seat.”

Harry quickly headed out of the room, leaving the three adults alone for a few moments.

“Did you feel it?” McGonagall asked.

“I did.” Dumbledore sighed. “I truly wish there was a way for us to find out what it was.”

“What ‘what’ was?” Snape asked.

McGonagall checked no-one was listening at the door. “When the students began coming into the school, the wards triggered. Someone, or something, is carrying an object of very Black magic. Unfortunately, there’s no way we can detect the object, or where it is.”

Snape tilted his head. “Do we know anything about what the object is?”

Dumbledore sighed. “Based on the readings, it was a Necromantic object of some type. Very powerful.”

“I’ll search the Slytherin dormitories during first period tomorrow, Albus.” Snape offered. “If there’s anything on Necromancy there, I’ll find it.”

Once in the Great Hall, Harry carefully walked to Hermione’s side, and sat down. As Snape passed, he cast a similar notice-me-not charm on Hermione.

“Harry!” She hissed. “What happened?”

“The Weasleys.” Harry said quietly. “It was a complete SNAFU, Hermione. Fred, George and Ginny all left some of their stuff behind, so we had to go back and get it, and then the portal was sealed. I wanted to send Hedwig off with a note, sit in the café and have a brew, then either apparate or take a Portkey, but Ron dragged me into the car.”

She shook her head. "That boy does seem to think with his stomach. I bet he was eager to get here just for the food." She sighed, and leaned closer to Harry. "You smell good." She murmured into his neck. "I really missed you over the last month."

"I missed you, too." Harry said softly. "You bunking with me tonight?"

"If I can." She replied.

"As far as I'm concerned, Hermione, you can spend every night there." He grinned suddenly. "And look at the bright side; as soon as we get upstairs, you can give Ron a good and thorough bollocking."

She grinned widely. "You know just the right things to say, Harry." She said smugly.

The two watched the Sorting, noting that Ginny Weasley was one of the last ones to be Sorted. When she put the Hat on her head, it took several minutes. A couple of times, Harry was absolutely certain it was about to shout out a word beginning with 'S'. Finally, it shouted out "Gryffindor!"

As Ginny ran to the table, quickly sitting with the other new first years, Harry and Hermione exchanged a glance. "You feel that?" She whispered.

"Yeah..." Harry replied. "She's gonna be trouble."

"On guard?"

"Always."

Harry looked at Ron, who'd turned a wonderful puce colour, which clashed magnificently with his carrot-coloured hair.

"Even then, when she was just a know-nothing first year, we suspected that Ginny would be trouble. The child was a perfect Slytherin, apart from one key aspect; she had not an ounce of cunning. Really, Gryffindor was the only place to put her. She wasn't smart enough for Ravenclaw, not cunning enough for Slytherin,

although she had plenty of ambition, and absolutely no loyalty to anyone, except herself. It's quite sad that in the process of elimination, all that was left was Gryffindor." Harry said, ignoring Ginny's rapidly rising temperature.

"In a way, it's a bit like Draco Malfoy. He wanted to get into Slytherin, and that's exactly where the Hat put him. But why?" Hermione looked around the room. "It wasn't because he was cunning and ambitious. It's because he was a thick, cowardly, untrusting git. Slytherin was all that was left."

Harry ignored the Weasleys (after all, he and Hermione had nearly seven years of practice, and they were both very good at it) and carried on with the tale.

"Lockhart... ah, dear Gilderoy! What an utterly useless prat. We'd all bought his books, inflating his coffers considerably. Hermione and I read through them during the summer, and both of us, quite rightly, realised that, at best, he was useless, and at worst, a liar."

"Shortly after the first lesson, we realised that he was both. A useless liar..."

Flashback: Main Courtyard, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Wednesday, 2nd September, 1992

Hermione quickly looked around the courtyard, making sure there was no-one around to overhear. "What a prick!" She hissed.

"Please, Hermione, don't mince your words." Harry said with a grin. "Tell me what you really think."

"I think he should have his eyeballs plucked out through his arsehole. Honestly, did you hear that pitiful attempt at a 'spell'? 'Peskipiksi Pesternomi'? Let's break that down, shall we?" Hermione cleared her throat. "Pesky Pixie Pester No Me." She enunciated clearly. "Useless ponce. I'd love to ask Dumbledore what the hell he was thinking when he hired him."

“He was thinking that Lockhart was the only applicant.” Snape said from two feet behind them.

Both teens jumped, pulling their wands and spinning round. “Sweet Jesus, don’t do that!” Harry gasped.

“Sorry.” Snape said.

“No, you’re not.” Hermione pointed out.

“No, I’m not.” The grinning potions professor replied. “Anyway, Albus hired Lockhart because he was the only person to apply for the job. The rumours about the position being jinxed seem to be true. We haven’t had a DADA professor last a full year since the 1960’s.”

“I think we should arrange a book burning.” Hermione said casually. “Or, even better, take them all back for a refund. I mean, they’re a galleon a piece! That’s robbery!” She leaned closer to Harry. “I’m just glad I can use your set.”

“And the fact that Lockhart gave them to me for free.” Harry pointed out. “It’s such a shame about Ginny, isn’t it? She thought I’d give them to her.”

Snape cleared his throat. “You two have been reading ahead in Defence, haven’t you? I mean, from a proper textbook, not Lockhart’s fiction.”

“Yes, sir.” They intoned together.

“Well, I’m sure a few of us would be able to teach you a few things, which you could pass on to your house-mates, and maybe some of your year-mates. Perhaps a series of assignments and essays, which we can slip under Gilderoy’s radar. At least that way, you’ll learn some proper defence.”

“Yes, sir. That’d be appreciated.” Hermione said thankfully.

Snape glanced down at his watch. "I have an idea. If you have a free hour or so, we can head inside, and I'll see if Albus will let me furnish you both with a copy of the standard defence syllabus." He led the two back inside. "And, by the way? At the end of the year, I believe we should hold a barbecue, using Lockhart's books as the fuel. I'll bring the steaks..."

"So, at that point, we began to learn Defence Against the Dark Arts from a true expert. Snape's experience meant that he was ideally suited to teach us defence."

"Yeah, 'cause he's an evil, Dark wizard." Ron called up, not really speaking to the pair.

Above Harry and Hermione's heads, the floating letters, 'You only 'know' what we wanted you to believe' flashed again. Neither of the Potters decided to answer Ron's complaint.

"Even though we were back at school, we were carrying on with our advanced training. Severus gave us an assignment; brew a complex, OWL-level potion. He volunteered the Polyjuice potion. Part of the assignment was to test our cunning; we had to get the Moste Potent Potions book from the restricted section, which we tricked Flophart into authorising, then obtain most of the ingredients. Naturally, we didn't steal the more complex ingredients. When we told Snape we had everything but the bicorn horn and the boomslang skin, he gifted us with the right amount."

"I started brewing it in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, since no-one ever goes in there-"

"Really?" James interrupted from his portrait. "That's where we brewed the Animagus potion, in fourth and seventh year." He looked at Harry and Hermione with pride. "Same reasons, too."

Hermione winked at James, then carried on with the tale. "Unfortunately for us, Ron came upon us brewing it, and decided that it was an excellent way for us to check out the 'slimy Slytherins'. We didn't really care about that, since Professor Snape had already checked out the Slytherins, and found nothing.

“As is known...” Hermione took a deep breath, “when I used the Polyjuice, a cat hair got into my sample. Which made me have a slightly different reaction than just changing form. Polyjuice is not to be used with any animal hair.

“Everyone knows,” above her head, the floating message flashed again, “that I spent weeks in the hospital wing being healed. But, I didn’t actually need to. I had to take several potions from Madam Pomfrey, but that was it. So, I spent my time hiding in Harry’s dorm room, and reading. Well... there was one other thing, too...”

Flashback: Second Year Boys' Dormitory, Gryffindor Tower,  
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Saturday, 26th December, 1992 - 22:06

Harry lay awake in his bed, waiting for Hermione. She’d told him that Madam Pomfrey would allow her out of the hospital wing, provided she wasn’t seen by anyone. When Hermione had produced her Invisibility cloak, she’d relented, and said she could leave.

He heard the door open, barely audible over the deep rhythmic snoring of Ron, and peeked through his curtains. There was nothing visible in the room, but that didn’t mean anything. Just in front of his bed, the air rippled, as Hermione’s altered head appeared. Without needing to say a word, Harry pulled back the curtain, allowing her to creep in, before he allowed the curtain to drop, and sealed it with a sticking charm.

“Hey.” He said, as Hermione pulled off the cloak.

“Hi.” She retorted. “You know, it’s really weird trying to walk under a cloak with a tail.”

He shook his head slowly. “Er... no, actually. I didn’t know that.”

She grinned at him, the effect quite menacing considering she no longer had lips, but a muzzle. “Well, it is.”

Harry reached under his pillow, pulling out the object he'd secreted earlier. As soon as he held it up, Hermione's eyes locked. Her hand reached up, batting at the ball of yarn, before she realised what she was doing, looking up at Harry with a glare. "That's not funny, Harry."

He grinned. "Oh, it was." He threw the ball onto the floor, noting that Hermione's eyes tracked it as it rolled away. "What's it feel like?"

She looked up at him. "Well... Polyjuice doesn't actually change your DNA, or anything like that." He nodded; he'd read the book as well. "But, with an animal, it does change a bit of your brain. That's why I seem to like balls of string."

"What about the tail, though?" Harry asked. "I mean, doesn't that feel weird?"

She looked at him, her yellow eyes glowing brightly. "Well, yeah, of course it does. My tailbone's grown three feet in length, and is full of muscles I didn't have before." The tail flicked. "It's kinda cool, though." She grinned at him. "You want to play 'I'll show you mine' again, don't you?"

He nodded.

Hermione began reaching up, pulling off her blouse. "I should warn you now, I'm furry all over. It's quite soft, though." Within moments, she was naked. She quickly yanked Harry's pyjama bottoms down, and stretched out, face-down, on his bed.

Harry reached up, gently tracing his fingers over her-now furry back. She was right; the fur was luxuriously soft. He pressed a little harder, beginning to scratch lightly, and was rewarded by a purr from Hermione.

Letting his hands trail lower, he began to stroke her trail. A thought occurred to him. "Hermione?"

"Hmm?" She grunted back drowsily.



“Cats normally get annoyed when you play with their tail. You’re not gonna scratch me, are you?”

She lifted her head from her arms, looking over her shoulder at him. “Well, don’t try and rip it off, or bend it the wrong way... but no, I’m not gonna scratch you.”

He kept on stroking the tail, gripping it and moving his hand down, letting it trail through his fingers. Harry released the tail, letting his hand trail over her buttocks. “Furry butt cheeks...” He murmured. “They feel really weird.”

“But good...” Hermione mewed. She pushed down, turning herself over, with some effort.

Harry got his first glimpse of her front, and breathed in. “You... you have six...”

Rolling her yellow eyes, Hermione nodded slowly. “Yes. All cats have six. You know that.”

“Yes, but cats have six nipples, not six breasts.” And indeed, Hermione was now the owner of three sets of breasts. The top set, what would have been normal on an untransformed Hermione, were definitely the biggest pair, while the two ‘secondary’ sets were smaller, barely bumps on her torso. Harry ran his fingers along her side, his thumbs brushing over all six of her nipples. She shuddered.

Deciding this was a good sign, Harry leaned forward, taking one of the upper nipples into his mouth, flicking his tongue over it. She mewed, loudly.

She pushed him backwards, forcing him onto the bed on his back. “My turn.”

Harry looked up into her yellow eyes. “You know... as cute as you look like this, and you do, I don’t like the fact you don’t have lips. I can’t kiss you like this.” He grinned. “Although, the ears are gorgeous.”

She clucked her tongue at him. "Harry, look at the plus side." He cocked an eyebrow. "I now have a four-inch tongue, and my mouth is longer." The tail flicked again, slowly wrapping round his rapidly-rising erection. "And a tail."

She began to saw her tail back and forth, the sensation maddening to Harry, while her tongue lathed at his nipples. She quickly moved her mouth down, her tail moving away, and her muzzle encompassed his entire length. He moaned in pleasure, only to gasp as her tongue snaked out, gently massaging his scrotum.

"Sweet Jesus..." He moaned.

Hermione hummed in agreement, as she bobbed her head up and down. With a strangled moan, Harry came, barely managing to control the urge to thrust up into her mouth. The tongue lathing his testicles vanished inside her mouth, rubbing over the little head, sending jolts through him.

Primly, Hermione pulled back, wiping the corners of her mouth daintily. "Hmm... a cat's taste buds are more sensitive than humans..." She noted absently.

Taking a few moments to gather his wits, Harry stared at her. "That was brilliant..." He gurgled. "Can I do you?"

Hermione quickly clambered forward, straddling his head. Harry looked up, seeing her glistening pink skin, a scant inch from his face. He inhaled deeply, noting that although she looked different, she still had that same great scent.

"What?" She asked, looking down at him.

He looked into her yellow eyes. "Sorry... just thinking of all those TV adverts; 'New packaging, same great taste!'"

She rolled her eyes, before they shot open, as Harry's tongue connected with her. He quickly began flicking it over her clitoris, getting into a comfortable rhythm. Hermione began a mixture of mewling, yowling and purring as she felt her orgasm begin to boil in

her belly. Her knees clamped on the sides of Harry's head, as she let out a near-roar as she succumbed.

Harry continued his ministrations, seeing if he could manage a 2-for-1 deal. Based on Hermione's gasps, he was well on the way. With a scream of "Harry!" Hermione came again, falling to the side as she clamped her thighs together.

After a few moments of panting, she turned to look at him, staring at him. "That was good..." She mewed happily. She climbed into the bed next to him, pulling the duvet over them, as she snuggled against his chest. Without thinking, her tongue flicked out over Harry's closest nipple, flicking it gently.

"If you keep doing that," Harry said, his voice husky, "I doubt I'll get to sleep tonight."

"M'kay." Hermione mewed, making no effort to stop. Her hand trailed down his crotch, beginning to stroke him gently.

"Hermione."

She looked up. "No, Harry. I'm part-cat at the moment. Cats like to play. You'll just have to grit your teeth and bear it."

He grinned as she increased her stroke slightly. "I'm sure I'll manage." He tilted his head to blow on her ear, which flickered, making both of them giggle slightly.

"Good."

"The rest of that year carried on, as recorded. Several more Muggleborns were attacked. None of us knew that Ginny was being possessed by the Heir of Slytherin. I remember hearing a few people say that Dumbledore should have known about it? How, exactly? True, he's a very accomplished Legilimens, but it's illegal to mentally probe people without their direct written consent, on charmed parchment, to ensure they're in their right mind."

“He was the Headmaster.” Percy called up, not bothering to climb to his feet. “He should be aware of everything that goes on in his school.”

Perfect! Harry thought to himself, as he stared at Percy. “She’s your sister, Weasley! You should have seen what was going on! You, as a Prefect, should have known something was wrong with her! But, no... all you cared about was kissing arse.”

“I obeyed the rules!” Percy snapped.

“As did Dumbledore... and yet, you want to blame him.” Harry shook his head. “How you got to be Head Boy baffles me, it really does. But then again, you proved how utterly useless you are when you abandoned your family, to kiss a criminal’s arse.” He turned away. “Then, in mid-April, something truly horrific happened. Hermione was one of the people attacked by the Basilisk. I’ll admit, I was pretty bloody pissed off about it. Someone dared to attack my Hermione?”

“I headed to the Hospital Wing, where Madam Pomfrey arranged to let me bunk, so I could spend time with her. Poppy believed that even though she was petrified, there may be some way that I could get through to her.

“I stripped down to my boxers, and lay with Hermione. I took one of her hands... and found a page from a book. It contained information about the basilisk. I grabbed my dressing down, and went and got Madam Pomfrey, who called for Professors Snape, McGonagall and Dumbledore. Even though he’d been officially removed from the school, he never left the premises. He cared about his students, and had to find a way to help them.

“As soon as I told him and the others about Hermione’s theory on the ‘monster’ being a basilisk, Dumbledore set a tag net over the school. The instant a Basilisk entered the castle, we’d know about it.”

“Yes, in a perverse sort of way, your reaction was quite amusing.” Snape said from his portrait. “You were so full of righteous indignation that something had the sheer nerve to take ‘your Hermione’ from you.”

Harry raised an eyebrow, sneering at the potions master. "Anyone who tries to take my Hermione from me will face a shit-load of trouble." He winked at his wife, before turning back to the crowd.

"The tag net triggered at the end of May. We headed to the first floor, where we saw the message written on the wall. 'Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever'. Since we were just outside Myrtle's bathroom, we went in and asked her how she died."

"Dumbledore should have done that the first time!" Percy called up. "He should have asked the ghost immediately."

Harry turned to face Dumbledore. "And why didn't you do that, sir?" He asked, already knowing the answer, which Dumbledore knew that he knew.

"Myrtle Banther was always a little intimidated by me." The old man twinkled from his frame. "I tried, several times to speak to her, but each time I approached, she headed off down her u-bend, and it would take hours for her to return. I even asked some of the other ghosts, and she... refused to speak to them." That was a polite way of saying Myrtle cried, wailed and spat obscenities at Dumbledore's messengers, always refusing to answer.

"However, Miss Banther was always rather fond of Harry, and she answered his questions. It was at that point we knew the Chamber entrance was in that bathroom."

Hermione cleared her throat. "That's something I've always wondered; since this castle was built a thousand years ago, and there wasn't such a thing as indoor plumbing back then, how the hell didn't anyone notice a huge tunnel when the bathroom was being refitted?"

Dumbledore smiled. "The magical community has always had 'indoor plumbing', Mrs. Potter, just not in the same way that the Muggles have. Our taps use conjuration runes to create water, while the plug holes have vanishing runes on them. It's the same for the toilets and showers. Since we can repair and transfigure sinks and toilets, those

are the same facilities that were originally fitted in the castle, ten centuries ago.”

Harry chuckled at Hermione’s ‘o’ of realisation, before carrying on with the tale. “So, we found the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, and myself and Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall and Snape headed down. Unfortunately, we weren’t the only people to enter the Chamber that day...”

Flashback: Entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Wednesday, 26th May, 1993

Looking at the tap with the snake marking, Harry hissed, §Open!§ The sinks began to grind and groan as they slid outwards, revealing a three-foot wide hold in the floor. Harry retched. “Sweet Jesus...” He muttered. “A millennium of stench...”

McGonagall had turned a pale green. “Merlin, that’s unpleasant.”

Snape chuckled, prompting the group to look at him. He was stood, his arms crossed over his chest, and his lower face distorted by a bubblehead charm. “Always thinking...” He said smugly.

“You can’t share the love, can you, Professor?” Harry asked, sighing in relief as what appeared to be an upside down fishbowl appeared, with a comforting vanilla scent. McGonagall and Dumbledore were quickly assisted.

“Harry, I would strongly recommend that you stay here.” Dumbledore said. “We don’t know what we’re going to be facing down there.”

Harry nodded slowly. “That would certainly be prudent, sir... but, if we’re dealing with a Basilisk, wouldn’t it make more sense for me, as a Parselmouth, to go down there with you? I’m the only one who could hear it coming, and I may be able to reason with it.”

Snape looked at McGonagall, then Dumbledore. All three agreed that, in theory, it was a fine idea, but none of them wanted to risk the safety of a student under their care. Harry seemed able to sense their indecision. "This thing, whatever's doing this, took my Hermione away from me. For a month. I'm feeling very unforgiving about that."

Dumbledore sighed. "Harry, this could very dangerous. Basilisks have been known to grow to enormous lengths. I don't want to just say 'No' to you, but I must emphasise the possible danger. However, you are old enough and mature enough to make your own decision. I will, however, strongly insist on caution."

"Let's go." Harry said, only to be stopped by Snape.

"I shall go first, Harry." He said. "Out of the three adults, I have the quickest reactions. If you allow me a few moments to secure the bottom of this tunnel, then Minerva follows me, you follow her, and Albus brings up the rear."

Nodding slowly, Harry asked, "Why that order, sir? I'm just curious..."

"As I said, I probably have the quickest reactions, but Minerva is considerably more powerful than I am. If there is something waiting for us at the bottom of this tunnel, we should be able to subdue it, or at least hold it off."

Harry shrugged. "In that case, after you, Professors."

Snape jumped into the hole, yelling out in glee as he slid down. McGonagall rolled her eyes. "Boys." She scoffed, before she gracefully stepped forward, vanishing into the gloom. After a few moments, Snape called up.

"It's clear. Come on down, Harry."

Harry winked at Dumbledore, before he too jumped into the hole, laughing and cheering. He slid through the muck, landing on a floor of bones. "That was fun!" He said, as he hauled himself up to his feet. "Can we go again?"

Before McGonagall or Snape could answer, the sounds of Dumbledore's yells came down the pipe. "Geronimo! With thick, woollen socks!" He slid out of the entrance, turning his momentum into a forward roll, standing up sharply. Very impressive, for a man of 153.

"'Geronimo with thick woollen socks'?" McGonagall repeated. "Good lord, Albus, you need to cut back on the lemon drops."

Grinning broadly, Dumbledore flicked his wand at the quartet, banishing the mud and slime from their clothes. "Shall we carry on?"

As they entered the tunnel, Snape quickly spotted the snakeskin. "That's... large." He said.

"Can't we use that sort of thing in potions, sir?" Harry asked.

With a quick diagnostic charm, Snape vanished the skin. "Unfortunately, it has degraded to the point of uselessness. If we are able to reason with the Basilisk, we may be able to get fresh sheddings."

Dumbledore stopped, holding up his hand. With a quiet voice, he commented, "Someone or something else has just come down the pipe." Harry felt a wave of magic wash over him gently. Confused, he looked up at Dumbledore. "A form of magical sonar. It bounces off anything with a magical signature. Two people, by the feel of it, one adult and one child, are approaching."

The group waited with drawn wands, only to see a most unlikely pairing; Ron walked in first, unarmed, casually stomping through the tunnel. Behind him was the giant teeth and bad-perm of Lockhart, holding on to Ron's damaged wand.

"I really must thank you all." Lockhart said. "You've just provided me with my next book: Battling the Basilisk. Of course, I was far too late to save the girl, or the teachers who'd gone down to rescue her. So sad..."

"What are you doing, Gilderoy?" Dumbledore asked sternly.



Lockhart shrugged. "I might as well tell you, since you won't remember shortly. Since my primary skill is memory charms, I'm going to Obliviate you all, and take credit for this... marvellously failed rescue. It's so sad about that little girl, but her parents have six other children. I'm sure they'll learn to cope." He held up the damaged wand "Obliviate!"

Four shields materialised, sending the memory charm back, massively magnified. As the spell hit Lockhart, the damaged wand exploded, sending out a wave of magical energy. Dumbledore span round, sending a low-powered banishing charm at Harry, while McGonagall sent one at Ron, sending the two boys flying in different directions. The roof of the cavern began to fall, forming a barrier between Harry and the three teachers.

A piece of debris hit Ron in the head, knocking him out. As the rock fall began to settle, Harry called out. "Professors? Are you okay?"

After a moment, Snape called back. "We're okay, Harry. The Weasley brat's knocked out, but we're okay. What about you?"

Harry took a quick inventory. He doubted his robes would ever be clean again, and he had a slight gash on his cheek from a chip of stone, but apart from that, he was intact. "I'm okay too, Professor. What do you want me to do?"

Dumbledore's voice boomed. "Wait there, Harry. We'll need a few moments to clear a path through this debris. Can you see anything on that side?"

Harry quickly looked round. "Er... there's a big circular door, about twenty metres ahead. It's closed, and I can't hear anything. No hissing, or weird, evil voices spouting 'kill'. Do you want me to go and look ahead?"

On the other side of the rocks, Snape looked at Dumbledore. "It'll take us several minutes to clear through this, Albus, at best. It might

be better if Harry can go ahead and scout out the Chamber. The last thing we need is to be caught unaware by a Basilisk at this point.”

“I don’t like the idea of sending him on alone, Severus.” Dumbledore said. “All we can do is ask.”

“Harry?” Snape’s voice shouted. “Do you still have your wand?”

“Yes, sir.” Harry shouted back.

“Can you go on ahead and scout out the area? And for the love of Merlin, be careful! The last thing we want is for you to be hurt.”

Harry checked round, unconsciously echoing Snape’s sentiments. “Yeah...” He muttered to himself as he started walking. “I don’t want that, either.”

It only took thirty seconds to reach the circular door, with a deep breath, and a hiss of, §Open!§, Harry passed through, entering the Chamber proper. He saw Ginny lying on the ground in front of a large statue, a pool of water in front of it.

“Ginny!” He shouted, dashing forward. The little redhead was lying on the ground in front of the pool, deathly pale. Clutched to her chest was a small black book, the diary that Harry had found months before, only to have it stolen from his dormitory.

“She won’t wake.” A voice said to Harry’s right. He looked up to see a tall, reasonably handsome chap, but his expression was cold, full of malice.

“Tom Riddle, I presume.” Harry said softly, clutching his wand. “And why won’t she wake?”

“Because I don’t want her too.” Riddle replied.

“And how did you get here? You’re just a book.”

“A memory, actually.” Riddle corrected. “Preserved in a diary for fifty years.”

Harry nodded, tightening his grip. “I presume you’re the one who’s been setting the basilisk on people, using Ginny as a conduit.”

“Yes. I’m impressed, Harry Potter. From what little Ginny said, you’re not that bright.”

“Yeah, well... ‘No-one here is exactly what he appears.’” Harry quoted. “And I think you certainly qualify as that. We both know no mere memory is capable of possessing students. What are you?”

With a raised eyebrow, Riddle just stared at Harry. “What am I? I’m eager to meet you, that’s what I am. The foolish little girl’s been pouring her heart and soul into a diary for months. How she had to come to school with second-hand robes and books, how she was teased... how she didn’t think famous Harry Potter would like her.”

Harry shrugged. “Well, I don’t, really. But, you answered my question. Soul magic...”

Riddle’s face showed a trace of panic, as he lunged forward, his fist impacting on Harry’s jaw. Utilising his training, the younger boy fell with the impact, rolling back to his feet, only to spot Tom picking up his wand. “Now, I have questions for you, Harry... and you will answer them.”

“Will I?”

“How is it that a boy with no extraordinary magical talent can defeat the greatest wizard in the world? How did you survive with just a cut on your forehead, while Voldemort’s body was destroyed?”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “You want to know how Voldemort was defeated? Why? You’re from the forties. Voldemort was after your time. And besides, Dumbledore’s the greatest wizard in the world.”

“Voldemort is my past, present and future!” Tom hissed angrily, flicking his wand in the air, writing out fiery letters. Before he could rearrange them, Harry spoke up.

“Ah, an anagram... Lord... Voldemort... ‘I am Lord Voldemort’? Really, Tom? Flight from Death? That explains a great many things.”

“I am the Heir of Slytherin!” The young Voldemort snapped angrily.

“I don’t care!” Harry replied, in the exact same tone.

Voldemort’s youthful face looked enraged. “Then we shall fight, Potter. And you shall lose.”

Dumbledore looked up from his task of moving rocks. He’d just felt a... a wave of... something. “Fawkes!” He shouted, summoning the ancient firebird to him. The bird appeared in midair, hovering over Dumbledore’s shoulder, a grubby package in his talons. “Fawkes, can you flash us to Harry?”

The three teachers reached up, grabbing hold of Fawkes’ tail feathers, to be engulfed in gentle flames. They reappeared outside the now-sealed entrance to the Chamber, without Fawkes. Dumbledore’s wand flicked over the doorway.

“There’s some kind of ward over the entryway. It’s designed to block any wizards passing through.”

“Can we bypass?” McGonagall asked.

“No...” Dumbledore began jabbing his wand, muttering in Latin. “It would take several hours to bypass them.”

“At least Fawkes has passed through.” Snape said, in a tone that was meant to be conciliatory, but was anything but.

McGonagall has an inspiration. “Severus, maybe because you bear the Dark Mark, it will allow you to pass through.

Snape shrugged and placed his hand on the door, only to recoil as his flesh began to sizzle. Quickly applying a cooling balm onto his flash-fried palm, he shook his head. "No... I don't think so."

"Then we shall have to take down this ward." Dumbledore said. The three teachers began their work, hoping that inside the Chamber, Harry would be okay.

Four minutes later, Fawkes reappeared, Harry holding onto his tail feather, with an unconscious Ginny Weasley slung over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Harry was pale, and barely able to stand. Snape quickly snatched Ginny off his shoulder, throwing her over his. "Hospital Wing, now!" He commanded.

After Fawkes materialised the five people to the Hospital Wing, he disappeared with McGonagall to collect Ron and Lockhart.

"What happened, my boy?" Dumbledore asked, as Harry lay slumped in his bed.

Harry quickly explained the situation, culminating in Gryffindor's sword coming out of the sorting hat, and using it to kill the Basilisk. He finished up with Fawkes crying onto his bite, neutralising the potent venom there.

"There was one thing, sir." Harry said, at the conclusion of his tale.

Snape and McGonagall had by now returned from their errands, Lockhart and the two Weasleys in a sound, medicated sleep.

"The young Voldemort told me that Ginny's been pouring her heart and soul into the diary, and that's what he was using to come back. A plain, talking diary with a memory inside isn't powerful enough to possess people, is it, sir?"

Dumbledore slowly shook his head. "No... no, it's not. And thank you, Harry. You've answered a question I've been trying to answer for almost thirty years. Based on what you've just told me, I now believe I

know how Tom Riddle survived that failed killing curse the night he attacked your parents.”

“Oh?”

“Would you like me to tell you now, or would you care to wait until Miss Granger is awake?”

Harry thought for a moment. “Brass tacks now, sir. Details later.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Very well.” He quickly gathered his thoughts. “The very basic definition of ‘death’, Harry, could be described as the point where the soul leaves the body, and heads to the next great adventure, yes?”

Harry nodded. “In theory, sir, yes. In Muggle mythology, that would be accurate, but scientists are still trying to prove or disprove the existence of the human soul.”

“The magical world already has that proof, Harry.” McGonagall said. “Necromancy, the art of death and life, deals with soul magic.”

“Indeed.” Dumbledore said. “For whatever reason death occurs, the body becoming too damaged, or old, the soul leaves it. The killing curse works by instantly stopping the body from working, forcing the soul to depart. Now, suppose a wizard had managed to remove a part of his soul, and placed it inside an object. This piece of soul, which would still be connected to the whole, would anchor the wizard to the world, rendering him effectively immortal.”

Harry nodded slowly. “So... that diary didn’t just contain Voldemort’s memories... it actually contained a piece of his soul. That’s how it was able to possess Ginny. And when she started writing in the diary, it began to absorb the energy from her soul... in essence, powering itself back up.”

“In a nutshell, yes.” Dumbledore confirmed wearily. “Fortunately, stabbing the diary with a basilisk fang, containing a potent magical venom, which would utterly destroy the book, would have banished

that piece of soul. It would head on to... well, I'd say it's next great adventure, but I strongly believe it would head downstairs."

"So... that's how Voldemort survived the Killing curse. Now that we've destroyed it, does that mean Voldemort's mortal?"

"A good question." Dumbledore said. "However, knowing Voldemort as I do... I don't believe he would be satisfied with a single Horcrux. I believe he would have made multiple Horcruxes, hiding them throughout the world."

"Oh, a scavenger hunt." Harry groaned. "That'll be fun."

"I doubt it." Snape sneered. "I detested playing scavenger hunt when I was a child."

"Me, too. Oh, this is gonna be bloody awful." Harry flopped his head back onto his pillow. "Why, oh why couldn't he have stuck them all in a safety deposit box in Geneva? Why do all villains have to put their priceless treasures at the centre of ridiculous traps and mazes." He chuckled dryly. "Gonna have to play Indiana Jones, aren't we?"

"I vote for Raiders of the Lost Ark." Snape said immediately. "I don't want to go in the Temple of Doom."

"You surprise me, sometimes." Harry chuckled. "Never pictured you as a movie fan."

McGonagall clucked her tongue. "Severus has often suggested movies for us to see." She mock-glared at him. "As long as we don't have to see Ghostbusters again. Nearly-Headless Nick was terrified for weeks."

"Moving on..." Dumbledore said. "Now that we have definitive proof of his Horcruxes, I'll need to start searching for any more. Again, Harry, I offer you the opportunity to hear the prophecy about yourself."

"Er... again, sir, do I need to know it, right now?"

"Need? No, not yet." Dumbledore said. "But, the offer is still there."

"Yes, sir. I think I'll wait a little longer. Last summer, being able to be a kid with Hermione, learning, swimming, playing... I really enjoyed it. I think I'd like to keep doing that, for as long as possible."

"Of course. Of course. You are only young once, and these years simply slip away. I would recommend that you, as well as Miss Granger, continue with your advance training. And..." He sighed theatrically, "I shall need to start searching for a new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor... again."

"Sir?" Harry asked, looking over at the occupied beds. "What's gonna happen to them?"

Dumbledore looked over. "Well... according to Madam Pomfrey, Gilderoy seems to have wiped his mind completely." He snorted uncharacteristically. "Bloody fool. A high-powered Obliviate like that could have left him as a vegetable. As it is, he'll need to be completely re-educated. Until then, I fear he will be staying in the long-term ward at St. Mungo's."

"And Ron?"

"Just a mild concussion. Poppy assures me he'll be fine in the morning." He looked over his glasses at Harry. "I believe you're asking, 'what should we tell him about the Chamber', yes?"

"Yes, sir."

"Hmm..." Dumbledore steepled his fingers as he spoke. "Perhaps young Mr. Weasley could be... encouraged to believe he went down there to assist you. It would certainly deflect some of the attention from yourself."

"It would, sir." Harry said. "Personally, I'm wondering why he was down there. Was it concern for his kidnapped sister... or something else? Ron's always seemed jealous, saying how his brothers are all successful and very accomplished. Ron seems to have latched onto me. His family sent me another Weasley sweater for Christmas. I don't really know them, and yet they dragged me to their house to



spend the rest of the summer there, last year. They make me a bit uncomfortable.”

“Normally, I would suggest that making friends is always a good thing. In what way do they make you uncomfortable?”

“Well, sir,” Harry sat up slightly straighter, “when I got the invisibility cloak for Christmas, during first year, Ron’s eyes lit up. He looked really jealous. And when I was shopping in Diagon Alley, and I went down to my vault, I could almost feel the greed from them. Not to mention that Ginny looks at me... stares at me. A lot.”

Snape sneered. “Yes, I’ve seen it in the Great Hall. Looks at you with longing. I wouldn’t be surprised if she tries love potions in the future.”

“And Mrs. Weasley kept making sure she sat next to me at meal-times.” Harry added. “I could almost see her picturing a wedding.”

“I shall start brewing you and Miss Granger a neutraliser potion.” Snape offered. “It will be a simple thing. A single dose, once a week, will be able to neutralise any potions or poisons.”

McGonagall cleared her throat. “Mr. Potter, I can understand you not liking a person, and that’s fine. It’s your life, and your choice. However, if you were to simply stop talking or spending time with Mr. Weasley, I fear that he would grow suspicious, and begin asking questions of all the wrong people. One thing I know about the Weasley family, bar Arthur, is that they seems to have short tempers, and rather active mouths. If Ronald were to start blabbing what he knows, it could have... consequences.”

“And one other thing, Harry.” Snape said. “This is a purely Slytherin viewpoint; by having the loud and obnoxious Weasley around, it will aid in deflecting people’s attention away from Miss Granger.”

Harry grinned. “I knew I liked you for a reason, sir.” He sobered slightly. “So... I have to keep him round, sir? He’s a bloody distraction... constantly wanting me to slack off and play chess, or gobstones. The prospect of sitting in front of the fire and reading a good book seems alien to him.”

"Alas, we are constantly facing trials, young Harry." Dumbledore said sagely. "I agree with your concerns over his motivation, however, I prefer to think that his sole purpose was to assist in the rescue of young Ginevra."

"I don't really know Ron all that well, sir. Ever since he drove Hermione into that bathroom, I've not really wanted to, either. The Weasleys seem pretty set on family, but Ron's insanely jealous of his brothers. Maybe the chance to be the hero appealed to him."

"We may never know." McGonagall said. "Now, Harry, get some sleep. We shall... attend to the Weasleys. They'll still be your 'friends'."

Ron hauled himself to his feet, his face beet-red in his rage. "How dare you!" He screamed.

"Sit!" Harry roared, prompting Ron's arse to hit the seat quickly. "Weasley, you can't deny that you were abnormally interested in me, from the very beginning. Your motivations at that time for being my friend? I don't know. Your motivations for going into the Chamber of Secrets? Again, I don't know. But, you offended my best friend, right from the start. And you just kept on doing it, didn't you? You bickered with Hermione, over the smallest and simplest reasons. Hermione suggests you do homework, you start arguing with her.

"And not just her, either. When the Chamber of Secrets was first opened, you were saying how it didn't matter that Filch's cat got petrified. Hell, you said you wanted the Heir to get Filch, too. Then, while working on the Polyjuice potion, you told Hermione that she reads too much. You're happy to throw insults around left, right and centre, yet whenever someone returns the insult, you go absolutely nuts."

"I do not!" Ron ranted. "How can you say lies about me like this, Harry?" His eyes narrowed as he looked at Hermione. "It's because of her, isn't it? She's been corrupting you against me!"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Shut up, Ron." He turned slightly. "At this rate, we're gonna be here all bloody day. Arthur, any chance you can silence your brood until the end?"

Arthur nodded, casting powerful silencing charms over his entire family, bar Percy.

"Potter."

Ah, speak of the devil. "What now, Percy?"

The officious little knobsock cleared his throat. "You shall address me by my proper title, Potter. 'Junior Undersecretary Weasley'. You must show me the respect due to my station."

Harry's eyebrow slowly rose up. "Really, Weatherby? In that case, I must insist that you address me by my proper title, that of 'Lord Potter-Black'. However, since we're old buddies, I'll be nice, and let you call me 'My Lord'."

"Potter, your arrogance-"

"Unless you want to duel, Weatherby," Harry interrupted in an ice-cold tone, "you will address me properly. I will remind you that I toasted Voldemort's arse less than a month ago, and you cannot possibly hope to beat me. You have exactly one chance to save your skinny hide, and that's by answering, 'yes, My Lord'. Do you understand me?"

Grinding his teeth together, Percy spat, "Yes... My Lord."

"Now, Junior Minion of the Ministry, what was your question?" Harry asked politely.

Still looking furious (and as a Weasley, it was easy to tell when he was furious; he was awake), Percy asked, "Are you saying that you told Dumbledore to perform unauthorised, illegal memory charms on a minor member of a pureblood family?"

"No." Harry replied simply.

“Then why did Dumbledore do it?”

The portrait of Dumbledore cleared his throat. “If I may... Minion,” He winked at Harry, “The Lord and Lady Potter were training to defeat Voldemort by the time they were twelve years old. It had been established during the obstacle course at the end of their first year that Mr. Weasley’s abilities did not match up to his ambitions. Harry was certainly willing to be in the presence of Mr. Weasley in the common room, but being a part of a fabled ‘Golden Trio’? No. However, with Mr. Potter’s agreement, we decided that we would allow young Ronald to believe that.”

“Why?” Percy asked, making notes on his parchment.

“Because,” Harry said stiffly, “Ron suffers from the same affliction that almost all the Weasleys suffer from; a lack of tact, a lack of discretion, and a bad temper. Combine all three of those things, and he would have blurted out our secrets within a week.” Harry said. “Now, I’m bored with talking about Ron. He’s a minor player in our saga. We shall continue with our tale. There were two more notable events for us before we broke up for the summer. The first was in regards to Hagrid. Since it’d been proven that he did not open the Chamber of Secrets in the forties, his expulsion couldn’t be reversed, since he was of age, but his ban from owning could be, and was, dispelled. He went to Ollivander’s, getting fitted with a new wand, which he stuck into his umbrella, since he’d been using that for almost five decades. The last major event was Hermione’s recovery...”

Flashback: Second Year Boys' Dormitory, Gryffindor Tower, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Tuesday, 15th June, 1993

Harry was sat on his bed in the dormitory, breathless with anticipation. Madam Pomfrey had announced that the Mandrake draft was ready for use, and the petrified students would all be released back to their dormitories. He was hoping that Hermione would make her way up to see him, so they could spend the evening snuggling.

The curtain to his four poster parted for a few seconds, before dropping shut again. Harry heard the dulcet tones of his favourite person utter a silencing and sticking charm, before the air rippled. Before Hermione could utter a word, Harry had grabbed hold of her blouse, pulling her forward, pressing a kiss against her lips.

Hermione squeaked and melted into the kiss, wrapping her arms around Harry's shoulders. A few moments later, she leaned back. "Did you miss me?" She asked breathlessly.

Another kiss was her response, as Harry pulled her closer. Again, she pulled back, looking into his eyes playfully. "I'll assume that's a yes."

"Oh, god, Hermione..." Harry groaned. "It was torture, seeing you... just lying there." He pulled her close, wrapping her in a tight hug. "I was so scared... I thought you'd left me."

"Never." She mumbled into his neck. "You and me, Harry... all the way, remember?"

"All the way." He mumbled back, breathing in the scent of her hair. "Now, at the risk of being crude, strip off. I've got two months of cunnilingus backed up here."

"If you insist." Hermione said in a bored tone, already pulling off her clothes. She clambered up to the head of the bed, getting herself comfortable. Harry scooted down, lifting up her legs, climbing underneath, and letting them rest on his shoulders.

"Ah, I've missed this." He said, breathing deeply. Without another word, his tongue snaked out, gently lapping away at her sensitive bud. Hermione let out a breathy moan, as her hands automatically started to trail through his hair.

"Oh, Harry..." She mewed softly. "You're so good to me..."

Leaning forward slightly, Harry locked his lips around the bud, pressing his tongue against it, and started to hum. Hermione began to shudder as an orgasm quickly made itself known. Instead of

releasing her, and allowing her to surf along the crest of pleasure as he did normally, Harry kept going, upping his tempo, and began flicking with his tongue.

For the next hour, Harry worked on Hermione's body, trying to wring every ounce of pleasure out of her that he could. For the next hour, Hermione was in a near-constant state of orgasm. For the next hour, she panted, sweated, squirted and writhed underneath Harry's ministrations.

When Harry finally pulled his head away, Hermione's IQ had dropped to the low teens. The only thought in her brain was 'sleep'. Her eyes drifted closed as she managed to get herself into a vaguely comfortable sleeping position, waiting for Harry to come alongside her, so she could rest her head against him and snuggle.

Harry watched Hermione scoot down, her hair plastered to her face by sweat, and she'd come so many times, her skin had turned blotchy. She was the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. "I love you." He whispered in a soft voice.

Hermione's eyes shot open as she looked at him incredulously. "What?"

"I love you." Harry replied, looking intently at her. "You're everything to me, Hermione. Everything."

She reached up, cupping his cheek, as she tried to haul herself into a sitting position. After almost a minute, she got her tired muscles to comply. As she was about to kiss him, he held up his hands.

"Hang on a minute." He said. "Let me just go and brush my teeth. I've got you all over my mouth."

Hermione, not in any mood to wait, pushed two fingers into herself, smearing one over her lips, and pushing the other into her mouth and sucking on it for a moment. "There, now I've got me all over my mouth. I want my kiss." She grabbed the back of his neck and hauled him forward, locking her lips onto his own. The kiss started out passionately, but softened, becoming more tender and romantic.

She pulled back looking into his eyes. She loved his eyes. They were so expressive, and now they positively shined with his love. "I love you too, Harry." She said, pressing a chaste kiss onto his lips. "I love you too."

"We left Hogwarts, and headed home." Harry concluded. "We'd had an interesting year, and a rather painful one, considering Hermione was petrified for so long. But, our first two years hadn't exactly been 'normal', had they? Both of us had the suspicion that things would turn more interesting. And, of course... we were right."

## – CHAPTER THREE –

School Year: 1993-1994

The Great Hall, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Saturday, 1st August, 1998

Harry glanced at his watch, deciding that he was kinda peckish after speaking for the last two hours. He conjured a plate of sandwiches and a pot of tea. "Sorry, folks, barely had time for breakfast this morning." He put two sandwiches on a plate, passing it to Hermione, then another two on his own, while she prepared the tea.

"Ah, dinner and a show." Harry muttered, biting ravenously into his sandwich. "Feel free to conjure yourselves something to eat, too. At this rate, we're gonna be here for quite a while yet."

After finishing his first sandwich, Harry wiped his mouth, and carried on with the tale. "Where was I? Ah, yes. Getting home from Hogwarts. Naturally, myself and Hermione decided that carrying on with the arrangements from the previous summer would work best. To reiterate, I would Portkey over to Hermione's, or she would Portkey over to my relative's house. We carried on with our intensive studies, focussing more on Defensive magic and the Mind Arts.

"Ooh, incidentally," Harry said, smiling at Hermione in remembrance, "when Professor Snape came round for our first summer potions lesson, we burned the Lockhart books, wrapping up some potatoes in foil, and using them to fuel the fire. That was a satisfying meal."

Hermione snorted at him. "It was. Watching those pictures of Lockhart burning..." She sighed happily.

"We also discovered something quite interesting, in some of the books we borrowed from the library. We learned that, by using certain rituals, it was possible to share inherited gifts, as well as hide those gifts. I shared the ability to speak Parseltongue with Hermione, and we performed a concealment ritual, a bit like the Fidelius charm. Each time one of us spoke Parseltongue, the people around us would hear



an instantly forgotten conversation about a History of Magic assignment, so we could talk freely.”

Percy, again, climbed to his feet, his parchment and quill in hand. “So... you’re telling us that you passed the Parseltongue ability, a known Dark ability, to Granger in some kind of Dark ritual.”

“No.” Harry said brusquely. “That’s not what I’m telling you.”

Scribbling notes furiously, Percy sat down.

“At the end of second year, we’re asked to pick our elective courses for third through fifth years. Ron decided to pick Care of Magical Creatures and Divination, since they were the two easiest courses available, and he wanted easy grades. Hermione, naturally, wanted everything. As did I. So, like my beautiful wife, I signed up for all five of the elective courses.”

Harry looked over, to see a red-faced Ron miming angrily. “I’m gonna regret this...” Harry muttered, flicking his wand in Ron’s direction, removing the silencing charm that had been cast by Arthur earlier in the day. “Something on your mind, Ronnie-boy?”

“Yeah!” Ron spat. “You didn’t sign up for all those courses! You were with me, in Divination and Care. You weren’t running off all the time!”

Harry deftly reapplied the silencing charm, grinning widely as Ron’s face turned a beautiful puce colour. “As I was saying, Hermione and I signed up for all five courses. There was, however, a small problem; at least three of the electives ran at the same time. So, how would we attend them? The answer? A time-turner.”

Both Harry and Hermione had already started looking over at Percy Weasley. Predictably, the sycophantic little shit was already clambering to his feet.

“Did Dumbledore give the both of you time-turners?” He demanded petulantly.

“Yep.” Harry and Hermione replied in unison.

“Dumbledore gave a pair of immature children the ability to manipulate time, just so you could attend a few extra courses?”

Hermione cleared her throat sharply. “Well, I’d argue with the ‘immature children’ comment, but yes, he gave us time-turners so that we could attend all five electives.”

Percy was already scribbling notes. “You are aware that illegal possession of a time-turner is an automatic 5-year sentence at Azkaban, I presume?”

“Yes.” The Potters intoned together.

“And you were using them for an entire year?”

“No.” Came the dual-reply.

“Then for how long?”

“If you’d stop interrupting, we’d tell you.” Hermione said sharply.

“Where was I?” Harry asked, looking at his wife.

“Signed up for all courses.” Hermione prompted.

“Right.” Harry nodded. “During the summer, Hermione had gone to Diagon Alley to pick up the basic books and supplies we’d need for the summer, with a purse full of my coin, and we were planning to go again at the end of summer, for our third year supplies. After the ‘inflating incident’ with my Uncle’s sister, my Uncle demanded that I leave. So, I packed my trunk and portkeyed across to Hermione’s. She told me that the Ministry would have detected the outburst, and would be sending Obliviators and the Reversal Squad round. So, I portkeyed back, and staged a big leaving scene, storming out of my Aunt and Uncle’s house.

“I caught the Knight Bus to the Leaky Cauldron, and would spend the rest of the holidays in the Alley, naturally Portkeying across to Hermione’s, and her to me. Professor Dumbledore reconfigured our

Portkeys so we could go from the Cauldron to Hermione's and back again. That way, we'd be able to eat out, shop in the Alley, and generally enjoy ourselves.

"When my birthday came round, I received a package from the Weasleys, along with a newspaper clipping, showing that they'd won the Annual Prophet Grand Prize draw. With the money, they decided to take a family holiday to Egypt. So, I knew I wouldn't be kidnapped that year. I carried on with my studying, meeting up with the Weasleys at the end of August. While there, Ron took his pet rat into the Magical Menagerie, and Hermione bought herself a... pet cat. Or very small tiger." He glanced at his wife, who had narrowed her eyes slightly. "We never did find out what he is, exactly."

Deciding that it was better to continue the tale rather than risk the ire of his wife, he carried on. "So, we stayed in the cauldron on August 31st, Hermione bunking with me that night (and what an enjoyable night it was). However, before I went to bed, I overheard Molly and Arthur talking, saying that Sirius Black was coming after me. The following morning, I got up early, heading to Flourish and Blotts, looking for some books regarding Sirius Black. I bought three, packed them into my bag, headed back to the pub, and we headed to King's Cross.

"Just before I got on the train, Arthur pulled me to one side, warning me about Sirius, and he made me promise not to go looking for Sirius. I was confused; why would I go looking for a mass-murdering psycho? I decided that I'd ask the Professors when I got to school. The train ride, though, I shared the conversation with Hermione..."

Flashback: Hogwarts Express, Passing through the Midlands  
Wednesday, 1st September, 1993

"So, what's up, Harry?"

"In a minute, Hermione." Harry drew his wand, flicking it towards Ron. "Somnus." He intoned quietly, sending the redhead to a sound and

steady sleep. "Okay." He tucked his wand away, glancing at the older man in their compartment. He was still snoring lightly.

"Arthur Weasley pulled me aside before we got on the train. He told me that Sirius Black is after me."

"Which you overheard last night."

"Yeah... but, he deliberately told me... and he made me promise not to go looking for Black."

Hermione cocked an eyebrow. "Why on earth would you go looking for a man who wants to kill you? You'd have to be as stupid as Malfoy..." Her eyes involuntarily flicked to Ron. Harry caught the movement, and nodded. "Yeah, him, too." Hermione finished. "Why, though? Why does he think that you'd chase down a fully qualified, powerful dark wizard?"

"I don't know. This morning, as soon as I woke up, I popped across to the bookshop. I found three books about Black. I flicked through them, and it said that Black was the Secret-Keeper for my parents. He was the one who sold them out to Voldemort."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "What else?"

"According to the book, Dad and Black were best mates, brothers in all but blood. He was best man at my parents' wedding. When the Potters decided to go into hiding, it was fairly obvious that they'd pick him at the Secret-Keeper."

"Open and shut case." Hermione said. "Of course, our life hasn't been 'open and shut' for the last two years. One thing I've found about Wizarding press and books is that, while they may be accurate, they never print the whole picture. There's far too much that's subjective, and that's never covered."

"My conclusions exactly. While this story may contain the truth, it's not the whole truth. And there's something else, too."

"Oh?"

“Yeah... according to the teachers, during our Sunday morning discussions, Dad hung out with three other lads.”

“Yeah, you mentioned them. ‘Marauders’. Sound like kids playing grown-up.” Hermione tutted disapprovingly.

“Well... yeah, they do. But, the important part is the names of the four lads. James Potter, Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew... and Remus J. Lupin.”

Hermione’s eyes automatically flickered to her left, where the new professor was sleeping. “As in the man sitting two feet to your right?”

“Logic would dictate that he is the same man. Shabbiness aside, he looks to be the right age. And if he is the same man, it’ll be fairly easy to spot.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.” Harry leaned back, folding his arms across his chest. “He’s a werewolf.”

Again, Hermione faced the professor, scrutinising his appearance. “It would explain a couple of things. His shabby clothes, hair starting to go grey a little before his time. That scar on his cheek.”

“Yeah, Wizarding medicine can remove most scars, but scars made by a werewolf are hellishly difficult to remove. Also, I have vague memories of an ‘Unca Mooey’, from when I was little. If he was one of Dad’s best friends...”

“Yeah.” She snorted. “That’s a bloody awful play on words; ‘Moony’ for a werewolf. Your Dad’s sense of humour was pretty naff.”

“Possibly... the point is, I hope that our Moony will be up for some story-telling.”

“Let’s also hope that Professor Lupin can help wriggle the truth about Black out. I, for one, would love to know.” Hermione concluded.

“At the beginning of our tale, I told you that I’d spend every Sunday with one of the teachers, hearing tales and stories about my parents and their friends. Well, the Defence professor that year, a Mr. Lupin...” Harry turned to the communications mirror behind him, where Remus and Tonks were listening to the tale with undisguised awe; they hadn’t heard most of this before. The other portraits were sitting listening, waiting to add their two Knuts worth when appropriate. “Remus told me about Sirius Black, that he was my godfather, betrayer of his best friend, yada, yada, yada.”

Hermione took over the monologue. “We began attending classes, myself and Harry slipping off to manipulate time and attend all the courses. We quickly got into the rhythm of things, attending twelve courses, doing all that homework and reading, and even keeping up with our advanced studies. By this point, both of us were pretty proficient Occlumens, our minds near-impenetrable from external attack. Severus would randomly attack our shields, making certain that our defences were adequate.”

Snape’s portrait spoke up. “Indeed. I never once managed to penetrate your shields. A truly impressive accomplishment, considering your ages. I myself didn’t become that good until I was 22.”

Percy again began to stand up.

“Enough, Weatherby.” Harry called out wearily. “God damn it, we’re only part way through our third year, and I’m getting bored with you. Make your notes about these fictional charges, and we’ll answer your questions at the end, all right?” He shook his head, muttering depreciations about the Weasley family in general.

“The first two months passed normally. Me and Hermione worked hard, played hard, spent most of our time together, including bunking. We spent time with Moony, learning about the Potters. Apart from the whole ‘psychotic mass murderer trying to kill me on the loose’ thing, life was going pretty well. Of course, there was an ugly situation coming up. I hadn’t got my Hogsmeade form signed by my relatives, so I was stuck in the castle. Hermione offered to stay behind, but I

knew that Hogsmeade has a book shop that Hermione hadn't seen, and I didn't want to deprive her of the chance.

"I spent the day talking to Moony, and I saw Severus dropping off a goblet full of potion. Thanks to my studies, I knew that this was Wolfsbane. I asked Moony, straight out, to admit if he was a werewolf. With an expression that made him look like he was crapping razor blades, he confessed he was."

"Hey, I was nervous!" Remus said from the mirror. "You've seen some of the prejudice I face, just because I turn into a ravening bloodthirsty beast one night a month."

Harry couldn't help himself. "True, Moony... but then again, you're married to Tonks, who, let's be honest, turns into a ravening, bloodthirsty beast five days a month. And I remember Boxing Day '95... I think I'd rather face Moony, without Wolfsbane, than her."

Tonks scowled at him. "I still blame you for that, Potter."

"As you should, Lupin." Harry retorted instantly. "Anyway, Hermione went to Hogsmeade, checking out the bookshop and other parts of the village, while Ron tagged along with her. That night was the night Sirius Black tried to attack the Fat Lady portrait. We all went and slept in the Great Hall. What fun that was. A whole bunch of teenagers with dubious personal hygiene, loitering around. During the first Quidditch match of the season, while Malfoy was still milking the scratch he got during a Care of Magical Creatures lesson, my broom got destroyed."

"What is not commonly known is that I saw a Grim, watching from the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Didn't I, Padfoot?"

The portrait managed to plaster an innocent look on his face. "I'm not sure what you mean, Harry. I'm a good dog, me."

"You're an evil mutt." Harry muttered, with a 'hear, hear!' from Severus. "But, I fell off my broom, courtesy of a dreadful storm and a whole host of Dementors. My faithful Nimbus 2000 was destroyed by the Whomping Willow, a truly evil tree. During Quidditch practice, I was using one of the old school brooms, a Shooting Star, with all the

speed and raw throbbing power of a ladyshave. I could have used Hermione's Cleansweep, but that was her broom, and I didn't want to deprive her of it.

"Then came the next Hogsmeade visit. Ron, rather smugly, I thought, and Hermione headed out for Hogsmeade. Hermione was looking forward to doing her Christmas shopping in a Wizarding village, while Ron was just enjoying getting out of school. Secretly, I suspect that he was quite enjoying having something that the 'famous Harry Potter' didn't have. Of course, I couldn't prove it, but it doesn't really matter."

Harry glanced over at Ron, noting the fuming redhead mouthing something. He didn't really care what it was. "Fred and George, bless their little marauding spirit, dragged me to one side, and presented me with a tatty piece of parchment. They tapped it with their wand, saying a password, and the parchment turned into a map of Hogwarts, complete with secret passages. It also displayed the location and identity of every person in Hogwarts."

"Ah, our finest work." James reminisced from his portrait. "I know we made several versions, but the mark one... truly a thing of beauty."

"It was ugly." Lily said, frowning. "Version 2.0 was much better."

"Of course it was." Lupin called over from his mirror. "You designed it, Lily. And your charms work was far better than ours. But, James is right. The prototype was something we were all very proud of."

"The prototype was mean." Snape said. "All those built-in insults."

James looked over at Sirius. "Didn't we take those off in seventh year?"

"No. We couldn't be arsed, since he mainly used 2.0." Sirius replied. "But, you have to admit, some of those insults were pretty good."

"No, I don't." Snape said dryly.



Harry cleared his throat loudly, mock-scowling at the portraits, who settled down. Albus, from his frame, just twinkled. Harry turned back to the crowd. "We have to live with this." He shook his head. "So, armed with the Marauders' Map, and Dad's invisibility cloak, I snuck into Hogsmeade, bypassing the Dementors completely. Once inside the Three Broomsticks, I overheard Fudge gossiping with Madam Rosmerta and several of the Professors. Minerva and Filius knew that I knew about Sirius, but they couldn't really say anything with Fudgepucker right there."

Hermione stepped closer to her husband, rubbing his back supportively. "I admit, hearing them all casually talking about the brutal murder of my parents kinda annoyed me. To Fudge, it was just a story. Idiot..."

Flashback: Outside the Three Broomsticks, Hogsmeade, Scotland  
Saturday, 18th December, 1993

Harry had left the pub, fuming with indignation. Stupid fucking wanker! He thought angrily. Yes, 'Did Black betray them?' 'He did indeed.' Yeah, it was a dreadful shame, but there we go. Harry kicked through a bank of snow, watching it fly through the air.

After a few moments, Ron and Hermione appeared through the snow, casually walking towards him.

"Harry?" Hermione called softly, her voice filled with concern and love. "Are you here?"

He reached up, gently pressing his fingers against her face. "I'm here." He said softly.

"Are you okay?"

Ron decided to open his mouth, without thinking (as usual). "Yeah, mate... it's cold out here."

Dickhead. Harry and Hermione thought in unison. Hermione continued. "Harry, I know it's painful to talk about."

"Yeah, never mind that boring shite." Ron said. "Harry, how did you get down here? I thought Dementors could see through invisibility cloaks."

"Fred and George gave me a map." Harry replied tonelessly, annoyed at Ron's dismissal of his feelings as 'boring shite'. "It shows the location of everyone in the castle, as well as the secret passages and passwords."

Ron's jaw dropped. "How come Fred and George never gave it to me?" He demanded, outraged. "I'm their brother!"

"I'm sure Harry's going to hand it in to Professor McGonagall, aren't you, Harry?" Hermione asked. Harry, however, could read her tone, and he knew she would never allow such a useful tool to be taken away from them.

"Are you mental?" Ron asked rudely. "Hand in something that good to a teacher? Why would he do that?"

"Because Sirius Black might be using one of these passages to get into the school. The teachers need to know about it."

"Hermione, sometimes you're so unbelievably stupid!" Ron snapped.

Raising an eyebrow slowly, Hermione flicked her wand. "Confundus!" Ron blinked, as the confusion charm ran throughout his brain. While he was blinking, Hermione whipped out her own invisibility cloak, disappearing underneath.

"Oi, Weasley." Harry said in a gruff voice. "What you doing stood there? Granger's already gone back to Hogwarts."

Ron blinked again, before staggering away, heading back to the carriages.

After a moment, Hermione pressed closer, pulling off her cloak and climbing under his. "Okay, now that the idiot's gone, we can talk properly."

"Do you really want me to hand in such a useful rule-breaking and learning tool?" Harry asked, amused.

"Do I bollocks!" Hermione retorted. "I was just screeching for Weasley's benefit. No, that's far too useful. Also, while we're time-turning, we'll be able to keep track of our other selves." She reached up, caressing his cheek. "Now, onto important matters; are you okay?"

Harry sighed. "Fudge strikes me as a complete arsehole..."

"Yeah, I got that." Hermione giggled. "Come on, Harry... the people who matter know the truth."

"I know..." Harry sighed, wrapping an arm round Hermione's shoulder, pressing a chaste kiss on her lips. "Shall we wander back? I know a cold, dark, drafty and dirty tunnel that's very good for privacy."

"Oh, Harry, you take me to such wonderful places..." She simpered. "Lead on, your romantic beast, you..." Hermione chuckled.

"On Christmas Eve, Hermione came and kipped with me again, sharing a kiss and cuddle as the clock struck midnight. That was the best present I received, in my opinion. In the morning, I started to open my presents..."

Flashback: Third Year Boys' Dormitory, Gryffindor Tower, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Saturday, 25th December, 1993

Wakefulness was not slow in returning as a pillow was pushed through the gap in Harry's bed-curtains, slapping straight into his head, rather harder than was necessary. "Oi!" Ron's voice called out. "Presents!"

Bleary-eyed, Harry nudged Hermione awake, who quickly grabbed her invisibility cloak and staggered to one side. Harry gave her a few moments to get into position to race for the door, before he opened his curtains. "Wha?" He slurred to Ron.

The redhead smirked at him. "Get up, you lazy prat! It's Christmas morning! You've got presents!"

I had a better present lying in my bed, you annoying gonk! Harry thought viciously, before slipping his glasses onto his nose. With a grunt, he shuffled to the bottom of his bed, noting a small stack of presents. Fortunately, he'd made his exchanges with Hermione at midnight, the pendant and earrings set being a big hit with her, while she bought him some rather natty and stylish clothes, which he'd make sure to leave at her house, since the Dursleys would take them to give to Dudley (never mind that the chubby bugger could never fit in them).

With a sigh, he unwrapped a suspiciously familiar package. Joy! Another patronising and insulting present from the Weasley family. The paper fell away. Oh, look! A Weasley sweater! How... unexpected. Further investigation revealed more unhealthy home-made 'treats'. Ooh... mince pies; I don't like mincemeat. Christmas cake; don't like dried fruit... Nut brittle, too... I don't like nuts, either. Bloody hell... doesn't that woman listen?

The saviour of Harry Potter's sanity walked into the dorm room, clad in a tight dressing gown, with her hair even bushier than normal. Damn, she's cute like that. Harry thought. In her arms was her small tiger Crookshanks.

"Hey, Crooks." Harry called out, letting the large feline approach. "Merry Christmas." He looked up to his better half. "Morning, Hermione. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Harry." She said dreamily, before turning to the red-haired menace. "Ron."

“Herms.” He said, stuffing a handful of nut brittle into his mouth, engaging in the time-saving practice of not bothering to close his mouth while chewing.

“Ooh,” Hermione’s voice was full of sarcasm. “Harry, Mrs. Weasley sent you a sweater! That’s nice of her.” She glanced at the head of his bed, where he’d stashed the boxes containing the comfortable jeans, shirts and hoodies she’d bought for him.

“Yes.” Harry said carefully, allowing the real meaning of, ‘yes, again, I’ve been insulted.’ He reached under his pillow, pulling out a small, neatly wrapped package. “Here you go, Hermione. Present for the tiger.” Said animal was thoroughly investigating the wrapping paper from the Weasley package.

Ron looked up with jealousy. “You got that thing a present?” He looked down at the bulge in his pyjama pocket, where Scabbers the rat was hiding. “Why?”

Harry glanced at Hermione, who gave a microscopic eye roll. “Ron, are you asking why I bought the cat a present... or why I didn’t buy Scabbers one?”

“Er... both.” Ron said after a moment of hard thinking.

“I bought Crooks a present, ‘cause that’s what Muggle families do. They buy presents for their pets.” He looked down at Crookshanks, who was busy batting at a piece of dangling ribbon. “Of course, there’s no bloody point in buying a cat or a dog a present, since they find the wrapping paper so fascinating.” He looked up. “As for why did I buy anything for Scabbers, Ron, I have one question.” Why the bloody hell should I? “What the hell do you buy for a pet rat?”

“Er...”

“Moving on.” Hermione said, looking down at Harry’s bed, the place she’d been comfortable and warm less than twenty minutes ago. “You’ve got another couple of presents there, Harry.” Investigating the pile, Harry saw a small package, about the size of a book. He quickly looked at the card.

I saw this, and thought of you.  
You can watch it in Albus' Pensieve, or arrange to buy your own.  
I have many more.  
Remus.

Harry opened the package, pulling out what appeared to be a book. He opened the book, seeing what looked like polystyrene wrapped tightly around a test tube, with a glowing silver strand inside it. "What the hell's this, Hermione?"

Her eyes widened. "It's a memory strand, Harry. One of the cool things in the Wizarding world is that you can extract a copy of your memories, and play them back. It's like a 3D home movie."

On the side of the vial was a short note. The Potters' Wedding Day. "Hermione... it's my parents' wedding... He's given me a home movie of my parents' wedding?"

"Yeah..." Hermione nodded slowly. "That's a top present. Does he say how to play it?"

Harry rechecked the note. "He says to watch it in a 'Pensieve'." He closed his eyes, thinking back to one of the Mind Arts books he'd read. "That's, er... that's one of those runic bowls, isn't it?"

Ron just scoffed. "Come on, mate! You've got more presents to open!"

Both Harry and Hermione scowled at the redhead, who didn't notice, thanks to finishing his nut brittle, and was starting work on his mince pies. Harry pulled another package to him, a thick, but slightly bendy parcel. "Hermione, your Mum and Dad have sent me something." He quickly started to unwrap the parcel, only to encounter difficulty. "Ah, your mum's one of those evil people who tape up all the seams, so you can't get into them, isn't she?"

Hermione giggled and nodded. "Yeah... sorry. Just vanish the paper. It's what I did."

With a flick of his wand, the wrapping paper disappeared, revealing three thick textbooks. "Cool... GCSE Biology, Chemistry and Physics. Excellent."

"Books?" Ron said, disgust in his voice. "You got a present from Hermione's parents, and it's books?" He thought for a moment. "Why did Hermione's parents get you a present?"

Harry looked up. "Possibly for the same reason that your parents gave me a present." Or, she knew that we're both into studying, and I would appreciate this present. Instead of having your family send me a pity gift. He chuckled softly to himself. Maybe it's 'cause I've met them and spent a great deal of time with them, finding out their interests, and them finding out mine.

"Hmm..." Ron looked unconvinced, but dropped the subject.

The last present, a long, thick package, was quickly unwrapped. "Hmm... no card." Harry said, looking down at the Firebolt carefully.

"Wow..." Ron intoned, his eyes locking onto the broomstick. "Who'd spend that much on you?"

Hermione looked Harry in the eyes, the words 'I would' firmly visible. "Dunno." Harry murmured. "I'm betting it wasn't the Dursleys, though."

"I bet it was Dumbledore!" Ron crowed. "He's always liked you. And, he gave you that invisibility cloak in first year." Again, the jealousy was back.

"That was my Dad's cloak he was returning, Ron." Harry said firmly. "He couldn't spend this much on a broomstick. It's just not feasible. I mean... this is a 1,600 Galleon broom."

Hermione quickly did the mental arithmetic, coming up with a figure of 80,000 pounds. Christ... you could buy a small house for that. She let out a low whistle. "That's... that's a hell of a gift, Harry. Based on that price, a Firebolt's a lot better than a Nimbus 2001, isn't it?"

“Loads.” Ron said contemptuously. “A 2001 is only about 600 galleons. The Firebolt’s an international standard broom.” He snickered/sneered. “Harry, just imagine Malfoy’s face when he sees you riding this.” He fell off the bed, laughing, but keeping his eye on the broom. “Maybe Lupin sent it to you.”

Yeah, Lupin, a guy who’s barely able to keep a job because of a medical condition, can afford to spend eighty grand on a broom for me. That’s why he has such poor clothes, and is too thin. That must be it, Ron. Never mind that I’ve already unwrapped his present. “I doubt it, Ron.” Harry said.

Hermione cleared her throat. “So, this is a very good broom, then?” She asked, staring intently at Harry, who nodded slightly, then cast a small glance at Ron, prompting Hermione to nod in response.

“Hermione!” Ron said. “It’s the best broom you can buy.” He waved her off dismissively. “Can I have a ride, Harry?”

It was at that point that the deities intervened in the lives of Harry and Hermione, in the form of a squashed-faced, bow-legged cat with a bottlebrush tail, as said cat leapt onto Ron’s bed. Scabbers the rat scrabbled out of Ron’s pocket, making a break for the door and freedom from the cat.

“That bloody animal!” Ron shouted, tearing through the door and down the stairs.

“Two things, Harry.” Hermione said, in a business-like tone. “One, I think Black might have sent you that broom, hoping for another accident. You should get it checked out. Two, I think you should keep it out of the dorm. I saw the way his eyes lit up...”

Harry nodded. “Agreed.”

“You want me to be the villain?” She asked quickly, peering through the door, listening for the return of the walking stomach. “I can go and report it to McGonagall, ‘behind your back’, so she can confiscate it, and keep it under lock and key until game time.”



“Would you?” Harry asked. “Are you sure, Hermione? I mean... he’ll be a complete arsehole.”

“And with any luck, he won’t speak to me for several weeks.” She grinned. “What a great Christmas present that would be.”

“Yeah.” Harry replied, nodding wearily. “If you’re sure, Hermione.”

“...rotten bloody animal!” Ron’s voiced echoed as he came up the stairs, his trembling rat in hand. He saw Hermione still standing there. “From now on, keep that bloody cat out of my dorm! Scabbers is very stressed, and you need to keep that... creature under control! Scabbers was here first, and he’s more important than that stupid cat!”

Hermione raised an eyebrow, looking at Ron as though he’d just dropped out of Crookshanks’ bottom. “Fine.” She spat, scooping up the cat and stalking out of the dorm.

After a two-hour Christmas dinner, in which Harry was convinced he’d put on at least twelve kilos, he stood up and made his way back to the common room. He put the Firebolt on the table, pulling out his broom servicing kit. Being a brand new broom, though, there was nothing that Harry could do to it, since it was already in top condition.

McGonagall stalked into the common room, followed by Hermione, who managed to look meek and worried as she sat down, picking up a book and pretending to read. She didn’t want to miss this show for all the gold in Gringotts.

“This it, Potter?” She asked, hefting the Firebolt from the coffee table.

For a brief moment, Harry had the urge to say, ‘Er, no, Professor. The broom you want is upstairs on my bed. This is a completely different Firebolt.’ He fought with, and restrained, the urge. “Yes, Professor.”

“And there was no note?” She asked.

“No, ma’am.”

Making sure Ron was glaring at Hermione, McGonagall winked at Harry. "I shall have to confiscate this, Potter."

"W-What?" Harry asked, putting on a very convincing performance. "Why?"

"It will need to be checked for jinxes and curses. I'm not a broom expert, but I'll arrange for Professor Flitwick and Madam Hooch to strip it down, and run a full check. Of course, neither of them have ever done this before, so it may take a while, and there might be a few faults with it after they're done..."

Ron's reaction was priceless, considering it wasn't his broom. "'Strip it down?'" He repeated. "Strip it down! You can't!"

McGonagall glared at Ron, making him quail. "You seem to be under the impression that I have to take orders from you, Weasley. You may have a detention for your petulant display. Report to Mr. Filch tomorrow morning at 8am." She tucked the broom under her arm and stalked out of the common room, Crookshanks following obediently behind.

Ron span on his heel. "Who the hell do you think you are?" He hissed menacingly.

"Excuse me?" Hermione said, looking up over her book.

"No, I don't think I will." Ron spat. "How dare you go running to McGonagall?"

Raising an eyebrow, Hermione looked up at Ron defiantly. "Because I thought, and Professor McGonagall agreed with me, that the broom was sent to Harry by Sirius Black!" And with a huff, she climbed the stairs to the girls' dormitory.

Ron let out a strangled yell before he stalked out of the portrait hole, presumably going to shout at the mousy little first year he'd seen at Christmas dinner.

Later than evening, when Harry and Hermione were tucked up into bed, she smiled at him. "Minerva sent a note with Crookshanks. They performed a full series of scans, and the broom's clean."

"They can tell that quickly?" Harry asked.

"Yeah." Hermione semi-shrugged; it was difficult to do when lying on your boyfriend's chest. "There's a spell called *Specialis Revelio*, which-

"Yeah, I know the one. I didn't know that works on broomsticks, though." Harry asked.

"It does. It displays a complete list of all spells and charms on an enchanted item. Even possibly hidden spells. The broom came up clean. McGonagall said she'll keep it until a few days before the match, so you have a few days to practice."

"Cool." Harry said, snuggling a little closer. "I don't particularly fancy flying round in the middle of a blizzard, anyway. I'm just glad Ollie's not here right now. He'd be driving us all nuts about this."

Hermione pressed a kiss against his nipple, before flicking it with her tongue. "I'm glad you agreed to have it checked out."

"I'm glad you told me what you were planning." He retorted, breathing in slightly as her tongue got into the right rhythm. "I'd have been pissed if you actually had gone behind my back."

"I wouldn't do that to you, Harry." Hermione said tenderly, breaking away from her ministrations for a few moments. "But, I was worried about that broom."

"Hermione, you're definitely the smart one in our relationship, but I'm far from stupid. I don't fancy another death-defying fall from a broomstick." He sighed, and pressed a kiss onto the top of her head. "And best of all, we've got our anti-Dementor lessons coming up

within the fortnight. Remus and Severus are gonna teach us how to fight.”

“No... best of all, I’ve still got you.” Hermione whispered, moving her hand down to a special part of his body.

“You’ll always have me.” Harry moaned as she took hold of him with that grip he loved so much...

Harry looked over at Ron. “So, Ron... you made the assumption that Hermione had gone behind my back to grass up the broomstick to Professor McGonagall. You never thought to ask if she had my permission, did you? No, you just leapt to a conclusion, and started ranting.” Harry looked at the whole crowd. “Like the vast majority of the Wizarding world. You get the absolute barest scrap of information, and leap to conclusions. The best part of this saga is just how easy it was to trick you all... because we didn’t have to do anything.”

“The Wizarding world suffers from the sheeple syndrome; you follow the voice that bleats the loudest. Hopefully, with a corruption-free Ministry, and a series of reforms, Magical Britain will improve, and become a better place for all of us.” Hermione said reasonably.

“With you in charge?” A snide voice asked from the middle of the audience.

Harry clicked his fingers and pointed in the general area of the speaker. “There! You see? We made a simple statement, that man leapt to conclusions, and suddenly, the whole of Magical Britain will think we’re trying to take over. You all leap to conclusions.” His gaze locked in on the bottle-blond of Rita Skeeter. “And you, Skeeter, are one of the main causes of this. You peddle lies, bullshit and slander, just to sell newspapers and books. You don’t bother to do the right and honourable thing and check your facts, like any half-decent reporter. You spy, sneak, get it wrong, and suddenly... I’ll be the new Dark Lord.”

“The people have a right to know, Potter!” Skeeter said snidely.

"The people have a right to the truth, Skeeter!" Harry replied, equally as snidely. "But then again, you probably don't understand that word." He shrugged. "No matter, no matter. As fun as it would be to stop now, the saga must continue."

Hermione cleared her throat, taking a sip of her water. "Just after the students returned in the New Year, myself and Harry began our anti-Dementor lessons, with Professors Lupin and Snape. A Defence Master, and a Dark Arts and Defence Master. Between the two of them, there's probably not a defensive spell or technique they don't know. We met up in the History of Magic classroom..."

Flashback: History of Magic classroom, Sixth Floor, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Thursday, 6th January, 1994 - 20:01

Hermione and Harry entered the History of Magic room under Harry's invisibility cloak, quickly pulling it off and stuffing it into Harry's pocket.

"Ah, I remember that cloak." Remus said fondly, as he watched it disappear into Harry's pocket. "James would often disappear under that cloak. Especially in his seventh year. And when he came back... well, the rumours about a werewolf's sense of smell are not exaggerated."

Snape cleared his throat from the shadows. "As fun as it is reminiscing, Moony, we really should get on with this lesson. I have a sneaking suspicion these sessions will not be as unnoticed as we may wish."

Lupin nodded. "Okay. Defence against Dementors. There is only a single spell that will work against a Dementor, called the Patronus charm. This is a post NEWT-level spell, but I believe the two of you will have both the power and control necessary to cast it."

"Does it require a high magical ability to cast, sir? I mean, I know Harry's very powerful, far more than I am."

Lupin looked at Snape, as both men degenerated into sniggers. Hermione huffed, putting her fists on her hips as she glared at them. "When you've quite finished..." She said dangerously.

"Sorry, Hermione." Snape said, barely managing to get his chuckles under control. "The reason that's funny is that you, at a mere fourteen years old, are already at least equal to our level of power, and you still have several more years of magical development, yet."

"Oh..." Hermione muttered.

"In care you're wondering, Harry, you're a little further up the power scale, and you have almost another year on top of Hermione's. You're going to be very powerful when your time comes." Lupin shook his head, focussing on the task at hand. "Patronus charms. Basically, a manifestation of positive emotions and thoughts. Although it sounds like food to a Dementor, it's actually poison, because it's unpalatable. It's the only thing they're afraid of. They'll run from a powerful enough Patronus."

Harry nodded. "Okay. What does a powerful Patronus look like? According to the book, they take the shape of animals."

"Indeed." Snape confirmed. "Should have known you'd have read up on the spell."

The two teens gave Snape a look that suggested he shared brain cells with a Flobberworm. "Right... you've read up on it. Of course you have. So, in order to produce a Patronus, you need to focus on a happy thought. A truly happy, powerful memory." He slowly raised an eyebrow. "I assume that you've been working on creating those."

Harry nodded. "That wouldn't be an inaccurate assumption, sir." He replied, deadpan. "Can we see your Patroni?"

Remus shrugged, flicking his wand as he intoned, "Expecto Patronum!" A large wolf bounded out of his wand, looking a little indistinct in the relatively bright light of the classroom. The wolf sniffed for a few moments, before realising that it's prey wasn't in the room, and faded from sight.

With a casual flick, Snape summoned his. A small werewolf erupted, sniffing Moony for a moment, before prowling around.

"A werewolf, Severus?" Lupin asked, amused. "Not quite what I'd picture from you."

Snape just shrugged. "Coming face to face with a werewolf was probably the most frightening thing I've ever seen, Remus. If I have a choice of having one of them on my side, even as an ethereal guardian protector, I'm having it."

The werewolf faded, vanishing back into the mist.

"You've faced a werewolf, sir?" Harry asked. "When?"

"Er... actually, me." Remus said sheepishly. "During our fifth year, just after our OWL exams, Sirius told Snape to go and look in the Shrieking Shack on the full moon. That's where I used to go when I transformed. Back then, the Wolfsbane potion didn't exist, so I was a fully-fledged monster."

"When I came across Moony, I damn near shit myself in terror." Snape admitted, without a trace of shame. "Your dad came and pulled me out of the way, at great personal risk to himself, before transforming into his stag form, and beating Moony back. Sirius was there, in his dog form, helping to subdue him. I ran, heading back to the edge of the school. James came upon me a few moments later, and he apologised. I pledged a life-debt to him, right there and then."

"Wait... Black told you to go and play with a werewolf?" Hermione asked incredulously. "That's almost an attempt at killing you!"

Remus sighed. "In Sirius' defence, which is not something I particularly want to do, he was joking. As soon as Severus turned up, Sirius beat me back, and then went and apologised."

"After a rather enjoyable fistfight, which ended up with Black spending three days in the Hospital Wing," Snape said with a grin, "I accepted his apology. At that point, I became the fifth Marauder. Unfortunately,

not everyone is capable of becoming an Animagus, so I never got assigned one of the 'traditional' Marauder names."

"You, sir?" Harry asked, his face a mask of shock. "You... but, Professor McGonagall said that you and my Dad didn't get on with each other."

"And we didn't, at first." Snape said amiably. "I don't deny it; I didn't like James. He was... well, a bit of a prick, to be honest. He mellowed out, though. After the prank war of fifth year, we joined forces."

"I still remember the bubble-bomb incident." Lupin chuckled. "Man, it took two days for James to counteract that one."

Snape saw the confusion on the children's faces. "I charmed a dungbomb to attach itself to James' nose, then cast a bubblehead charm on him, trapping the stench inside." He sighed happily. "That was truly exceptional work on my part."

"Hang on, though..." Harry said, "if you were friends with my folks, how did you end up joining the Death Eaters?"

Snape slumped onto one of the desks. "In a rather ironic twist... because of your Mum, Harry."

"Eh?"

"Lily Evans was a beautiful, brilliant witch, unmatched by any of her peers, and that included the other Marauders. Her talents were limitless, her star bright. Her ability with Charms was exceptional. She was a Charms Mistress... in all but name. The Ministry of Magic refused to grant her a mastery, since she was Muggleborn. They believed, and still do to this day, that Muggleborns shouldn't be granted masteries. Only those of 'worthy blood' are granted the title. Since I'm a half-blood, like yourself, I was able to gain my Potions mastery."

Remus sighed. "I remember it well. Lily was devastated. She'd developed a whole new series of animation charms, far more efficient and powerful than anything currently on the books. And she wasn't



allowed to register them. She was told that she could apprentice herself to a suitable master, and have him publish them as his work. They even suggested a 'suitable' master for her... Augustus LeStrange. She refused."

"At the time, I was furious. I believed that Voldemort and his Death Eaters offered a new way of doing things. A world where bigotry, intolerance and racism wouldn't exist. A world of merit and accomplishment. I had the Dark Mark for three months when I realised what the truth was."

"That's when you went to Dumbledore." Hermione concluded. "And he protected you." She cocked her head slightly. "Does that explain why he's been standing just behind me and to my right for the last nine minutes?"

Harry smiled at her. "No. I think he's testing our detection skills. And it's actually nine and a half. Good evening, Headmaster."

With a chuckle, Dumbledore faded into view. "My apologies, Harry, Hermione. I was hoping to witness your Patronus lessons." He nodded to Harry, in the formal duelling style used to acknowledge a point. "And to test your detection skills. Very well done."

"Thank you, sir." Harry and Hermione replied in unison.

"I, too, remember Lily's... unhappiness with the Ministry. It was I that sponsored her Mastery application in the first place. I was... displeased with the Department of Magical Education, and I certainly made them aware of that fact. Unfortunately, they blocked every attempt, stating that I, as a Master of Transfiguration and Alchemy, was not qualified to judge a Charms mistress. I took Filius along, but they refused his pleas, because of his parentage." He shook his head. "I only wish there was more I could have done."

"You tried, sir." Harry said firmly. "From what I've seen of the Wizarding world, it seems rife with corruption. The people with the money want to make sure they hang on to their power, and they'll step all over the 'little people' to do it. Even you, sir, as powerful and respected as you are, can't hope to fight the system."

Hermione took Harry's hand, squeezing tenderly. "One day, Harry..." She said softly. "One day."

Harry cleared his throat, squeezing Hermione's hand firmly, before letting go, and pulling his wand. "So... Patronus charms."

"Myself and Hermione quickly picked up on the Patronus spell, managing to create a thin mist on our very first attempt. At Professor Snape's prompting, we began kissing while holding up our wands, and we produced a very thick mist.

"By the end of that first lesson, we were well on the way to mastering the charm. It only took us three or four weeks before we managed to get it down. I gained Prongs, while Hermione picked up her Playful Patronus Otter, which Remus imaginatively called... Potter."

In the mirror, Remus shrugged. "Hey, it seemed funny to me and Severus."

"Yes..." Harry drawled. "The most interesting meeting about that year, which nobody knows about, was the day that Sirius Black broke into Gryffindor tower. What people 'know' is that Ron woke up and saw him. What actually happened was this..."

Flashback: Third Year Boys' Dormitory, Gryffindor Tower, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Saturday, 12th February, 1994

Harry was enjoying snuggling in his bed with Hermione. It didn't matter how often he did this; it was warm and comfortable. Harry's definition of 'home' involved snuggling with Hermione, and her definition was certainly a match to his.

He was beginning to drift off, when the door to the dormitory creaked open. Instantly, his eyes widened, as his wand flew to his hand. Hermione was also instantly awake, pulling her wand. Both of them

kept themselves armed at all times, with the rumours of Sirius Black out to kill Harry.

Hermione held up her invisibility cloak, making a circling motion with her finger. Harry nodded, then pointed to the near-wall side of the bed. She pulled the cloak on and slipped out of the side. Harry waited a moment for her to get into position, before he slipped out of the curtains.

It only took a second to locate the intruder; a tall man, clad in black robes stood over Weasley's bed. Both Harry and Hermione could smell the filth that covered the robes, and could almost feel the small vermin that infested him. They waited for a few moments, wondering why a rabid killer was standing in the middle of his crime scene. Harry raised a finger and made a shooting motion. In perfect synchronisation, the teens raised their wands, one visible, the other invisible, and stunned the figure. He slumped backwards, landing quietly on the floor.

Hermione pulled off the cloak, kneeling down and turning the figure over. "Sirius Black." She looked up at Harry. "Just how stupid is he to walk into a school that knows he's coming?"

Shaking his head, Harry looked at Ron's bed. "That's not the question I want to ask. Why did he spend so long at Ron's bed? He never sleeps with his curtains closed, more's the pity, so a single glance would tell him that it wasn't me."

"Also valid." Hermione admitted. "Then again, the whole situation seems a bit fishy to me. Let's take him to Dumbledore. Maybe get Lupin there, too. He knew Black while he was at school. Maybe Professor Snape. He'll be able to dose him with a little Veritaserum."

Hermione draped her cloak over Sirius, while Harry grabbed his. "Come on, then." He muttered. "Let's go and make some trouble." Levitating Sirius, the tow headed out of the door, leaving four Gryffindors, completely unaware that anything had happened.

Avoiding Filch and Mrs. Norris on the stairs (and they'd had years of practice at said endeavour), the two had an uneventful trip down to the Headmaster's office. It seemed that Dumbledore never slept, since he was sitting at his desk. His only concession to the hour was a lack of hat, and a lit pipe on his desk.

"Ah, good evening." Dumbledore said, watching two of his favourite students calmly, but oddly carefully, make their way into his office. "And what can I do for you two at this late hour?"

Hermione pulled the invisibility cloak off the floating Sirius Black. "We found this in our dorm room, sir."

Dumbledore nodded, his eyes locked on the figure. "I shall pretend that Harry found Mr. Black in his dorm, Miss Granger, for obvious reasons."

"Of course, sir."

"I appreciate you bringing him here." Dumbledore said with a frown. "I will confess to having a few questions for Mr. Black." He looked at Harry and Hermione. "Might I suggest that the two of you head back to bed? Such a thing is surely not for your ears." He gave them a 'significant look'.

"Of course you may suggest it, Headmaster." Harry said, neither him nor Hermione moving a muscle.

"Excellent." Dumbledore said. "Now that the formalities are out of the way, I shall ask one of the House Elves to wake Professors Lupin, McGonagall and Snape. Perhaps we shall uncover the truth of the situation."

In short order, the three teachers had arrived. Remus was clad in a pair of sweat pants and a plain t-shirt, with an expression of infuriated anger on his face. His wand was in hand as he stared at his former friend. "Oh, we shall have words..." He hissed.

McGonagall was in her nightclothes, with a tartan dressing gown firmly tied shut. Her concession to the lateness was that her hair was

out of it's normally tight bun. She, too, carried her wand, and a look of anger.

Completing the group was Severus Snape, clad in his normal black robes. Harry looked him over, spotting a flash of white. "Er, sir?" Harry asked.

"Yes?"

"Er... you're flying low, sir."

After zipping up, they all turned to Dumbledore. "Severus, would you be good enough to add three drops of Veritaserum to Mr. Black's mouth? Remus, would you put him in that chair?"

Remus hauled Black to his feet, near-throwing him into the hard wooden chair, before flicking his wand, sending a stream of thick, sturdy ropes at his former friend. Snape, leaned forward, gently pushing down on Black's chin, and letting three drops of Veritaserum fall onto his tongue.

"We'll need to wait a few moments for it to take effect." Snape said, stepping backwards, and resting on the corner of Dumbledore's desk.

Dumbledore clicked his fingers sharply, making a circling motion. Harry and Hermione picked up on the cue, moving behind the bound prisoner, so they wouldn't be seen, but could still hear everything. "And now... we shall get our answers."

Sirius began stirring slowly, the Veritaserum making him lethargic.

"What is your name?" Dumbledore's voice demanded sharply.

"Sirius Orion Black."

"What is your date of birth?"

"March 21st, 1960."

"Why did you betray James and Lily Potter?"

"I didn't."

"How could that be?"

"I was not the Secret-Keeper for Godric's Hollow."

"Then who was?"

"Peter Pettigrew."

"And you killed him."

Sirius didn't answer; it was not a direct question.

"Why did the Potters make everyone believe that you were the Secret-Keeper, if it was in fact Peter?"

"It was a piece of misdirection; since I was also going into hiding, it was believed that Voldemort's forces would come after me, rather than Peter."

"Ah..." Dumbledore nodded. "What happened with Peter Pettigrew on November 1st, 1981?"

"I found Peter in Birmingham, his home town. When I went to confront him, he already had his wand drawn, behind his back. He shouted loudly 'How could you? How could you betray James and Lily?' Before I could draw my wand, he'd sent a Bombarda hex at the street, detonating the gas main. With a manic grin, he cut off his finger and transformed into Wormtail, escaping into the sewers."

Remus nodded slowly. "Why didn't you tell anyone this?"

"I was stunned by the first Auror on the scene." Sirius droned. "When I woke up, I was in Azkaban. The guards told me that my wand was snapped, and that Crouch had ordered a life-sentence."

"Why did you break out of Azkaban?" Dumbledore asked, looking intently at Harry over Sirius' head.

“He’s here. I want to commit the murder I was imprisoned for.”

“Who do you want to kill?”

“Pettigrew. He’s here. He’s the pet of the Weasley boy.”

Harry’s eyes widened, as he mouthed ‘Scabbers?’ to Dumbledore. The old man nodded slowly, clearly wondering how the hell they’d all missed a hiding Dark wizard. “How do you know that he’s here?”

“When Fudge last came to visit the prison, he gave me his copy of the Daily Prophet. The article on the front page was about the Weasleys winning the Grand Prize draw. There was a picture, with Wormtail sitting on the boy’s shoulder.”

“Do you still have that article?” Dumbledore asked.

“It’s in my pocket.”

Remus flicked his wand, sending an Accio at Sirius. A battered piece of newspaper flew through the air. Remus quickly looked at the photograph, snarling slightly. “It’s possible...” He looked up at Dumbledore. “The rat in the picture appears to be missing a toe. If Peter cut off his finger...”

Dumbledore nodded slowly. “Sirius, what are your intentions towards Harry Potter?”

“He’s my godson. I want to protect him, and getting rid of the rat would certainly do so.”

Harry made a quick decision, and stepped round Sirius’ chair, stopping in front of the bound man. “What are you planning to do?”

“Find the rat and kill him.”

Thinking back over the activities of the last few months, Harry asked another question. “Did you arrange to send the Firebolt broom to me for Christmas?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I owe you 13 years of birthday and Christmas presents. It seemed like a good start, after your Nimbus was destroyed by the Whomping Willow.”

Hermione stepped forward. “Sir, why didn’t Black get a trial?”

Dumbledore looked old. “Millicent Bagnold, the Minister at the time, decided that there was no need for a trial. I tried... Merlin knows, I tried to get a trial. I, too, wanted to know the truth of the matter. At the time, however, I believed that Sirius could be guilty of his crimes. I wanted to know why he’d done what he’d done. Unfortunately, the guards at Azkaban were instructed to never let anyone visit him.”

“Couldn’t you have overridden that, sir?” Hermione asked.

“Again, Miss Granger, I tried. I went through all the channels available, constantly bringing it up in the Wizengamot. Each and every time, I was rebuffed. I brought it up in open session, I raised it on the schedule, I even tried submitting an international request. None of it was allowed to pass. People were just too focussed on the temporary defeat of Voldemort to bother with someone like Sirius.” He looked at the bound man. “For that, Sirius, I am truly sorry.”

“So... where do we go from here?” Snape asked slowly.

“Find the rat, get the truth.” Sirius said.

“And how do we do that?” Hermione asked Sirius.

“I need to get hold of the map from Filch.” Sirius said. “Because Wormtail was one of the creators, it will always track him, even in his Animagus form.”

“The map!” Remus said, smacking his forehead. “Of course... Albus, we need to get Filch up-”



“Er...” Harry interrupted, reaching into his pocket. “You mean this?” In his hands was a battered piece of parchment.

“I’m not going to ask how you got that, Harry.” Remus said, taking the map, and placing it on Dumbledore’s desk.

“Wait a moment.” Snape said, jabbing his wand onto the parchment. “I, Professor Severus Snape, master of this school, command you to yield the information you conceal.”

Harry watched the parchment as writing began to appear. Mr. Moony presents his compliments to Professor Snape, and begs him to keep his abnormally large nose out of other people’s business. Mr. Prongs agrees with Mr. Moony and would like to add that Professor Snape is an ugly git. Mr. Padfoot would like to register his astonishment that an idiot like that ever became a professor. Mr. Wormtail bids Professor Snape good day, and advises him to wash his hair, the slimeball. (1)

Snape looked up at Lupin, a grin on his face. “You never cleared the anti-Snape insults from the program, then?”

Lupin looked a little abashed. “Er... not until the second version, Severus, no.”

Snape just shook his head. “Don’t worry about it, Remus.” He tapped his wand on the parchment twice, clearing the insults, before intoning, “We solemnly swear that we are up to no good.”

The map quickly began to fill in, displaying all the people at Hogwarts. Snape quickly turned the map round, searching in on Gryffindor tower. He spotted Ron Weasley, Seamus Finnegan, Dean Thomas and Neville Longbottom, but there was no Peter Pettigrew.

“He must have run as soon as he spotted us levitating Sirius away.” Harry said. “Professor Lupin, is there anyway to highlight him?”

Remus tapped his wand onto the map. “Mr. Moony requests location of Mr. Wormtail.” It took a moment, before the map began flashing. “He’s on the third floor.”

"The passage to Honeydukes!" Harry said quickly. "The one-eyed witch passage!" He turned to Dumbledore, "Professor, he—"

Dumbledore had pulled what appeared to be a stone tablet from his desk drawer, and was tapping out a sequence with his wand. "I have now sealed all seven passages to Hogsmeade." He said brusquely, tapping out another sequence. "And have locked the wards. Nothing can physically pass in or out of the school grounds."

They watched as on the map, the dot marked 'Peter Pettigrew' dithered outside of the statue for a few moments, before turning, and running along the corridor. After a moment, the dot blinked and disappeared.

"Damn..." Lupin muttered. "Didn't get the disillusionment problem sorted until the second version."

"So, Peter will be somewhere on the grounds." Harry concluded. "How will we track him if he goes into the Forest? As a rat, he's too small to locate easily."

"As a rat, he'll be eaten in the Forest." McGonagall pointed out, speaking for the first time. "And unfortunately, by the time we get to the third floor, his scent will have dissipated too much for me to track him." She sighed at Remus. "It's a shame we can't use that nose of yours, Remus."

Snape cleared his throat. "I may have an alternative."

"Oh?" Dumbledore looked up.

"Well... Black's Animagus form is a dog, which we all know has superior nasal capabilities compared to a human. Why don't we simply allow him to search the grounds while we monitor the school."

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "That is a good plan, Severus. We shall have to make certain the Dementors do not locate him."

Harry turned to Sirius. "How did you escape from Azkaban?"

During the chat and map hunt, Sirius had been sitting quietly, waiting for the next question. "Dementors can't actually see people, only sense their emotions. Since Padfoot's emotions are more primal than my own, they believed that I was like everyone else. When they came to feed me, I slipped out, and managed to squeeze through the bars. I swam back to the mainland, and headed to the Forbidden Forest, where I've been staying. Apart from coming to watch the Quidditch games."

Dumbledore again nodded. "So, the Dementors are unable to locate... Padfoot, I believe you called your Animagus form? Would you be willing to search the grounds as Padfoot for Pettigrew?"

"Yes."

"And when you find him, bring him to me, without killing him."

There was a pause, as Sirius warred with his baser emotions. "Yes." He said sulkily.

"Good." Dumbledore said. "I will arrange for one of the house elves to leave food, clothing and medical supplies for you near the old tool shed, at the edge of the Forest daily. If you need anything, the elf will be able to provide it for you."

"Thank you." Sirius said.

"Severus, would you administer the Veritaserum counter-agent, please."

After the three drops of black liquid were poured onto Sirius' tongue, he began to blink rapidly, as he realised that he wasn't where he'd been. He saw Lupin, McGonagall, Snape, Dumbledore and Harry stood staring at him. "Er... hello?"

"Hello... Padfoot." Harry said slowly.

"James... no... Harry! Sweet Merlin..."

"I know." Lupin said. "Looks just like James in third year, doesn't he?"

"Moony? Oh, Moony, I'm so sorry!"

Lupin flicked his wand, cancelling the ropes, before he wrapped Sirius in a tight hug. "It's good to see you, Padfoot. Even better to think you aren't a traitor."

Sirius pulled back, looking at Harry. "It's good to see you, Harry."

Harry held out his hand. "You too." When Sirius took the hand, Harry pulled him into a brief hug. Sirius squeezed tightly, letting a tear drop out of his eye.

When they pulled apart, McGonagall rapped Sirius on the back of his head. "Foolish boy!" she hissed. "Strategy was never your thing, was it?" With a squeak, McGonagall pulled him into a hug, before pulling back, wrinkling her nose. "You need a bath, Black. Your odour is less than pleasant."

Sirius looked down at himself. "You try spending a decade in Azkaban, with only limited water, and see what it does to your hygiene."

Snape stepped forward. "Mutt."

"Bat." Sirius said, holding out his hand and grinning warmly. "Damn, Severus, it's good to see you, too." After shaking hands, the two men stepped back.

"So, I'm going hunting." Sirius said slowly.

"Not straight away." Dumbledore said. "First, you shall bathe, enjoy a hot meal, a good night's sleep and some fresh clothing. In the morning, I will arrange to take my newly acquired pet dog for a walk on the grounds. Then, we shall start searching for Pettigrew. Also, I would like for you to arrange some time on Sundays to spend with Harry. It has become a weekly appointment with staff members for Harry to hear tales and anecdotes about his parents. I'm certain you could contribute some... entertaining tales."

Sirius grinned. "Oh, I could think of a few..."

Harry took another sip of water. "So, we knew Pettigrew was in the castle, Sirius was innocent of the crimes he'd been accused of and we sent him out to hunt for Wormtail. A couple of times, Pettigrew snuck back into the castle, trying to get hold of a wand, presumably so the little shit could either try and apparate or make a Portkey, or even make a small hole in the wards to escape from.

"Ron was... convinced, that the encounter with Sirius Black had happened differently, that he'd woken up and scared him off. When Professor McGonagall came to investigate, she asked questions about who'd left passwords around. Neville got a bollocking, as well as a Hogsmeade ban, but that ban was only for one visit. Ron believed that Scabbers had been eaten by Crookshanks, and began to ostracise Hermione bitterly. I pretty much ignored his rant, because I knew the truth. Now that we knew Scabbers was Pettigrew, Crooks' actions made a lot more sense. He was after Pettigrew, too."

"Naturally," Hermione took up the tale, "we didn't want to allow Wormtail to get away. We both knew that Pettigrew, while a coward, had far too much intelligence about us to be allowed to escape. We kept a firm eye on the Marauders' Map, hoping to spot him if he returned to the castle.

"But, that wasn't the only thing myself and Hermione had to worry about, although it was certainly quite... quite important. We also had to deal with Malfoy and Buckbeak, as well as a twelve-class course load, not to mention our advance training.

"In mid-May, Pettigrew managed to sneak back into the castle, making it as far as the Gryffindor common room before Crookshanks scared the little bastard off. We later found out that it was to steal Ron's wand, since that was the most compatible wand he'd had, and in his weakened state, he needed all the help he could get."

Ron stood up, gesticulating wildly with his hands. A sigh on his lips, Harry flicked his wand, cancelling the silencing charm. "Right, don't do that again, Potter!" Ron snapped. "How dare you hex me?"

"You have a question, Weasley?" Harry asked in a bored tone.

"Yeah, I do. I know this is all lies, because you didn't speak to Hermione for nearly a month after Crookshanks tried to eat Scabbers."

Above Harry and Hermione's heads, the message flashed yet again. Harry cleared his throat. "Perhaps not that you saw, Weasley, but that doesn't mean it didn't happen. Both Hermione and myself communicated in several meaningful ways while we were bunking together, not to mention that we were in classes that you weren't, thanks to our time-turning."

"Things came to a head at the end of May. We'd just completed our end of year exams, Harry taking all twelve, while I took eleven, since I thought Divination was... well, shite, to be honest." Hermione admitted softly.

"Hey, I enjoyed Divination." Harry added with a grin. "It was a laugh. And it was always funny watching Parvati and Lavender drooling over Trelawney whenever she opened her mouth, as though she'd reveal the secrets of the universe." He chuckled for a moment, before turning serious. "What's not commonly known is that Sybil Trelawney is actually a prophet, but not a seer. She's qualified to teach the basics of Divination, such as reading palms and tea leaves, but she's not actually capable of doing it herself. She gave a prophecy, stating that Wormtail would escape and set off to the Dark Lord."

"Ever since the end of our first year, we knew that genuine prophecy was real, and that there are two kinds of prophecy. One, like Trelawney's, states that something will happen. It's unavoidable. She's not making a prediction, she's stating future fact. The other kind of prophecy states that something may happen, and that allows people some wiggle room." Hermione lectured politely. "Harry immediately shared that prophecy with me, and we set off to Dumbledore. He called in Remus, Severus and Minerva, and we explained everything."

Harry sighed. "Later that afternoon, we got a letter from Hagrid, stating that Buckbeak had lost his appeal, and was going to be executed at sunset. We went down to Hagrid's cabin to console him, and found Scabbers cowering in a milk jug. We tried to bring him back to the castle, when a huge black dog pounced on Ron, and dragged him underneath the Whomping Willow, breaking his leg.

"Remus came into the cabin, 'confronting' Sirius, and forcing Wormtail to change back to Pettigrew. Most of the 'confrontation' was staged, since we had people around we didn't want to know about it. When Severus came in, he was playing the role of the baddie, threatening Sirius, Remus and us. He was hamming up his role as a true Death Eater.

"As we were leading Sirius and Pettigrew out, Remus began to transform, thanks to the full moon. Sirius held him off while we ran. After an encounter with the Dementors, I woke up in the hospital wing, overhearing Fudge say that Sirius had been captured, and Snape was due for a medal.

"Professor Dumbledore sent the others away, and told us that we needed more time, pointing out that we could use our time-turners to go back, change things. Before we could go, however, Severus came into the hospital wing..."

Flashback: Hospital Wing, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Friday, 25th May, 1994 - 23:53

Snape quickly glanced around, making sure to see that he was quite alone, before he sat on Harry's bed. "I have little time, Harry, Hermione, so I must speak quickly. Earlier this evening, I received a most enlightening visit from the two of you. A visit you have yet to make. I know that you're about to turn time. Immediately seek me out. I shall be in Remus' office. Explain the situation to the two of us. Tell our past selves about the incident at the Shack."

"Sir?" Hermione asked softly.

"No time, Hermione." Snape said brusquely. "This has already happened for me. I know that Sirius has now escaped. You must follow this plan; travel back in time four hours, not three, as the Headmaster suggested. Use your invisibility cloak to head to Remus' office. Tell my past self and Remus that we must head to the Shrieking Shack, Remus at 21:04, and myself at 21:19. Explain that Pettigrew is there, and that he will escape. Moony's transformation will give him the slip he needs."

"There's no way to stop it?" Harry asked sadly.

"It's already happened, Harry." Snape said, not unkindly. "After explaining this to both of us, you must head to Hagrid's hut. When your past selves have sneaked out of the side door, untie Buckbeak and lead him into the forest. Then make your way over to the Whomping Willow. When Moony transforms, and Wormtail escapes, head for the beach on the eastern side of the lake. You'll need to use your Patroni to get rid of the Dementors. Then head back here as quickly as possible."

"Wait..." Hermione said. "This is moving too fast."

"Again, time, Hermione." Snape said. "Explain what has happened tonight to my past self, go to Hagrid's, rescue Buckbeak, head to the Willow, then fly on Buckbeak up to Filius' office. Sirius will be able to escape." He looked intently. "Have you got it?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, sir. It's a good plan."

Snape grinned. "It should be... you two came up with it. Now, four turns, and off you go. Be back here at midnight." He stood, and headed for the door, where Dumbledore was waiting.

"Well, Severus?"

"They're on their way, Albus." Snape replied softly. "They'll go back to approximately eight o'clock, and come and warn the younger me and Remus, who, by the way, has already taken his Wolfsbane potion."



They'll go to Hagrid's, only to flee when the Ministry executioner arrives. On their way back to school, the Weasley brat will be attacked by Black, who can smell Pettigrew."

"Ah, yes. The canine nose."

"Yes. He drags the boy under the Willow to the Shack, where Remus turns up, miraculously, who just happened to be looking at the Marauders' Map in his office. Since we have Trelawney's prophecy, we know that Pettigrew will escape. I'll be able to maintain my cover with the Death Eaters, since I'm displaying my obvious hatred towards 'light' wizards. Wormtail will escape, Remus transforms, and the Dementors attack. The time-travelling Harry and Hermione-

"Drove them all away." Harry's proud voice came from behind the two men. They span round, seeing a slightly more battered and bruised Harry stood there, his hand clutched tightly in Hermione's. "Mission accomplished, Professor. They're both gone."

"Excellent." Snape said. "Now, I must go and cause a scene with Fudge, in order to distract the bumbling arsehole from arranging an immediate search. You two need some chocolate, and some sleep. In that order."

Snape scurried away, while Dumbledore opened the door to the hospital wing. "Madam Pomfrey will take care of you. You've done a fine job this evening."

"Thank you, sir." Hermione said. "But, I'm knackered."

"Off you go. I'm sure Severus will be providing some entertainment for you to enjoy before you sleep." Dumbledore winked at the pair, before closing the door and flicking his wand at it.

Inside the ward, Harry took off his shoes, wincing as he smelt sweaty socks. He looked over at Hermione, who, on her own bed, mirrored his actions. "I really need a shower." He muttered.

"Me, too. Running around for nearly eight hours in the middle of summer will do that to you." She replied, then looked up at him with a

grin. "I really need one. When we were flying, and I had my arms round you, I came so hard... definitely need clean underwear."

Harry grinned at her, blushing slightly.

"Still, kip and shower in the morning." She winked at him. "I do hope you'll be joining me."

"I'd be honoured, miss." Harry replied grandly. He cocked his head as he heard several angry voices, and one man shouting.

"Potter!"

"We helped Sirius Black to escape, and saved an innocent hippogriff from execution." Harry concluded. "Not bad for four hours work." He looked over at Percy, who was scribbling notes like mad. "I will, however, make several observations, Minion Weatherby; first, Sirius Black never received a trial, and as such, was not a criminal. Second, Lucius Malfoy paid off the panel for Buckbeak's hearing, so that doesn't count either."

"We'd done good work." Hermione said. "We found out from our exam results that we were, again, the best in our year. Both of us were able to keep up with the strain of a full course load, not to mention our extra training. The two of us decided that we'd continue with our current schedule."

"Remus decided that he'd leave Hogwarts; it seemed that a certain Malfoy had found out about his Lycanthropy, and blabbed it to the whole school. Everyone believed that it was Snape who grassed him up, but we knew the truth. Before Remus left, though, he told us about a set of enchanted mirrors that the Marauders used to use during their detentions." Hermione gestured to the communications mirror, where Remus and Tonks were listening patiently.

"Remus told us how to create them, and we did, later that summer, including one for him, and one for Sirius. Instead of carrying around an oversized mirror, we incorporated them into watches; smaller and far more convenient." She held up her arm, showing her battered watch. Tapping it, the face flipped up, showing a small mirror. "We

now had a secure way to communicate with Sirius and Remus, not to mention each other during the holidays.”

“These watches were so useful.” Harry added. “We could Portkey to safety with them, and could communicate with the other people in our little... group. After a rough year, things were looking up. We had a full summer ahead of us, plenty of time to learn new things.

“But... neither of us knew what was coming. A year of trials and tribulations that would make our first three years look like nursery school. A year of combat, of betrayal, of arrogance and death and resurrection.”

Hermione sighed, looking at the crowd. “I think this is a good time to take a short break. We’ve been talking for three hours, and I need to go and fluff my Garfield (2). Excuse us.” The two disappeared off the stage, letting the crowd talk amongst themselves for a few moments.

The events of the 1994-1995 school year were among some of the most discussed events of the century, and none of them wanted to miss what would turn out to be a thrilling tale. The fact that there was more to the story... only served to entice them further.

(1) These are the insults from the Marauders’ Map in Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban.

(2) This was actually a skit on the American version of “Whose Line Is It Anyway?” You can probably work out what the subtle meaning actually is. (If not... there’s not a lot of hope for you, so I shall tell you. It means to go for a short bathroom break – a number 1, not a number 2)

## – CHAPTER FOUR –

School Year: 1994-1995

The Great Hall, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Saturday, 1st August, 1998

Harry returned to the stage, standing at the podium calmly, watching the people fidgeting as they waited for the resumption of the lecture.

“Feel free to make yourselves comfortable.” Harry said politely. “We’ve only gone through three of our years. There’s still another four to go. We’ll be here late into the evening at this rate. Perhaps taking a few moments for a comfort break, or maybe getting something to eat.”

He watched as several people clambered to their feet, heading to the bathrooms, while others conjured themselves some food.

After another five minutes, Hermione returned, smiling warmly at her husband. “Good god, I needed that.” She said, sighing happily. “Some people missing?”

“Yeah. Gone off to do what they need to.” Harry conjured another tray of sandwiches, before turning to the portraits. “How you guys holding up?” He asked softly.

“Apart from wanting to kill the Weasleys.” Sirius said, scowling at Percy. “I can’t believe that arsehole. You know at the end, he’s gonna try and have you arrested, don’t you?”

“Yep.” Harry replied casually. “Fortunately, we brought our paperwork with us. He’s got nothing but hot air and bluster.”

“Nothing new there.” Remus said. “I remember the snooty little prat from when I was teaching.”

“How’s Ripples?” Harry asked immediately. “He’s been very quiet so far.”

Tonks' image looked down. "He's fine. He's been listening to your story avidly. Probably doesn't understand a single word of what's being said, but he's been listening to your tone."

"Ah, good."

"Moony?" Sirius' portrait called out.

"Yes, Padfoot?"

"Why 'Ripples'? Couldn't you think of a name for your kid?"

"He's an honorary Marauder." Remus replied firmly. "That, and the fact that the day he was born, his hair kept changing colours. Not his whole head of hair, but it seemed to be rippling down each strand. Thus, Ripples." He sniffed disdainfully. "And his name is Edward, after Nym's father. We call him Teddy, though."

Harry couldn't resist. "You know, I'm glad that magical babies bounce."

"Why?" Tonks asked, her eyes narrowed.

"Well, with you as his mother, Nymmy, he'll need to be able to."

Hermione reached up and rapped the back of Harry's head. "Play nice, Harry." She said sternly, before turning to Tonks. "Is the plaza set up?"

Tonks nodded. "Yep. Everything's ready... in case it's needed."

"Excellent." Harry concluded. He glanced over his shoulder, noting that everyone had made their way back to their seats. "We're back."

The two teens straightened up and stood by the podium. "Everyone ready for our fascinating tale to begin again? Are you sitting comfortably?" He asked, rubbing his hands together. "Then we shall begin."

Harry took a moment to put his thoughts in order. "After we'd left Hogwarts at the end of third year, we returned to our... families. Hermione went along with Emma and Dan, while I went back to... the Dursleys. We still had our Portkeys to each others' houses, not to mention a whole summer of fun and learning. Plus, the Quidditch world cup was held that summer, so we both had something to look forward to."

"Even though I don't particularly enjoy Quidditch," Hermione said, "I didn't really have a problem going and watching the game. We'd both been invited by the Weasleys, even though Harry was in the process of buying tickets. Harry wanted to make sure his newly discovered godfather, who was a Quidditch fan, and his new honorary Uncle would be able to attend, if they wanted to."

"We did." Remus and the portrait of Sirius said together.

"We also began working on our communicators." Harry said, holding up his wrist, showing off the battered watch again. "During their schooling, my Dad and Sirius tinkered with a pair of communication mirrors. While this isn't a new concept in the Wizarding world, it's something that hasn't been done for centuries, since the spells to create them were lost around the time of the Founders, and the only ones left are massive things, one in the Ministry of Magic's archives, and the other in a private collection, somewhere. Dad and Sirius managed to recreate them.

"Sirius and Remus told us how to make a set. So, we did. Instead of having separate mirrors, though, we actually made very small ones, putting them into our watches. These were now communications devices, as well as Portkeys. I had no need to write to Hermione at all, since we could talk like using a telephone."

Hermione looked at the audience, seeing Percy scribbling furiously. She leaned in close to Harry, whispering in his ear, "Percy intends to confiscate these, so that they can be studied and used by the Ministry. He's planning on charging 25 Galleons a piece. Ambitious..."

Harry nodded slowly. "After we'd made them, me and Hermione popped into London, buying two rather nice and expensive watches,

which we took apart, added the mirrors, and then reassembled them. One was sent to Sirius, so he could keep in touch, while another was sent to Remus.”

In the communication mirror, Remus held up his arm, pulling the sleeve back, showing an obviously pricey Rolex.

“Since we saw Severus, Albus and Minerva almost every day, we didn’t make them watches straight away, not really seeing the point.” Hermione carried on. “We studied during the early part of the summer, then headed to the Weasleys, sending a set of tickets to Sirius and Remus, as well as the three Professors. All of them attended under glamours, so they could watch the game without needing to worry about being arrested, kissed, discriminated against or idolised.”

“A group of Death Eaters, drunk and feeling rebellious, started messing about, engaging in a spot of Muggle-baiting. When Bartemius Crouch Junior set off the Dark Mark, the Death Eaters ran, afraid at seeing it. Myself, Hermione and Ron were driven into the forest, where we spotted someone.”

“A group of Aurors and Barty Crouch Sr. came bumbling in, where they accused Winky the house elf of setting off the Dark Mark. We were puzzled. Me and Hermione headed off to a quiet corner, and called Sirius. He was still with Remus and the Professors. We agreed there was something very suspicious about the situation, since House Elves can’t actually use wands. Nothing to do with the fact that they’re not allowed, they’re actually physically incapable of using them. We all agreed to keep an eye on things, making sure that everyone was kept informed.

“When we got back to the Weasleys, we packed up our gear, ready to head to the Express.

“After a thoroughly normal, read: boring, train-ride, we got to school and had the Feast, then Dumbledore made the announcement about the Tri-Wizard tournament.” Hermione said.

“At that point, I got a sinking feeling.” Harry said, with a sigh. “I just knew, for a fact, that this was going to be nothing but trouble.” He chuckled for a moment. “I was right, too.”

“For two months, we worked as normal, Harry still attending all courses, while I was still skipping Divination, and continuing on with our advanced studies. By this point, we were so far ahead in Ancient Runes, we began studying warding. We were both at least OWL-level in all subjects, not to mention Occlumency masters, plus near-expert fliers. We were having fun and enjoying ourselves.”

“Don’t forget S.P.E.W.” Harry said lightly.

Hermione grinned at him. “Ah, yes... the ‘Society for the Promotion of Elvish Welfare’.” She smirked at the crowd. “Exactly how dumb did you all think I am? Do you really think that I’d run around trying to free the House Elves, without speaking to them? Please...”

Looking over the crowd, Harry saw people looking at each other curiously. He spoke up. “Hermione’s organisation, which actually became Ministry law just twelve days ago, now makes it illegal to harm an elf, or cause them to harm themselves. If such a thing happens, and believe me, it’s part of the same monitoring equipment as the Underage magic detection system so we’ll know if it does, then that person will be arrested and convicted of abuse. There is no way to avoid it.” He smirked at the angry faces on several of the pureblood wizards he could see.

“Where were we?” Hermione asked.

“The other schools arrived.” Harry said. “Beauxbatons, a school full of teenage French girls, and Durmstrang, a bunch of grouchy teenage lads.” He wrinkled his nose. “I bet the inside of that ship stank...”

“On Halloween of that year, we had the drawing of the Tri-Wizard contenders from the Goblet of Fire. The four who were chosen, myself, Cedric, Fleur and Viktor met up in the antechamber, just off this hall...”



Flashback: Great Hall Antechamber, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Monday, 31st October, 1994

Harry walked up the Great Hall, hearing his fellow students begin to calling him a cheat, and shout out insults. He stepped into the antechamber, seething at the injustice, before he allowed his Occlumency exercises to regulate his emotions. It took less than a minute for an emotionless serenity to wash over him.

God, we're like Vulcans. He mused to himself, suppressing a snort. Never let your emotions be shown in public. Suppose that explains Daphne Greengrass and Tracy Davis. With a sigh, he leaned against one of the bookshelves, tapping his watch idly.

"What is it?" Fleur said, looking up. "Do zey want us back in ze Hall?"

"I don't think so." Harry replied, bemused. "I think there's gonna be some shit hitting the fan tonight."

The sounds of scurrying feet came bounding into the room. Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, Crouch and Bagman dashed inside. "What happened, boy?" Crouch demanded imperiously.

"Harry, did you put your name into the Goblet of Fire?" Dumbledore asked.

"No, sir." Harry replied calmly. "I didn't."

"Explain." Fleur demanded petulantly. "What iz happeneeng?"

Harry looked at the French girl. "Miss Delacour, we're all very aware that you can speak flawless English. Please do so."

Fleur raised an eyebrow. "Very well, Mr. Potter." She said in accentless, flawless English, looking down her nose at him. "Has your name come out of the Goblet of Fire?"

"It did." Harry confirmed.

"How is this possible?" Cedric asked Crouch. "I thought there was an age-line round the Goblet."

"There was." Dumbledore replied.

"Then you must have made a mistake." Madam Maxine replied.

"It's certainly possible, Madam." Dumbledore acquiesced. "It's never happened to me before, but all things are possible."

"Stop it, Albus." McGonagall snapped firmly. "You and I both know that you didn't make a mistake. You have miscast a spell since you were twelve years old."

Harry drew his wand. "I, Harry James Potter, hereby swear on my magic and my life that I did not enter my name into the Goblet of Fire for consideration in the 1994-1995 Tri-Wizard tournament, nor did I ask another student, staff member or guest to do it for me. So I swear, so mote it be."

The others in the room calmed visibly at the proclamation. Since he was still clearly breathing, it wasn't a lie.

"I do have a question, though." Harry said, looking at Dumbledore. "Has the Goblet been tampered with?"

Crouch and Bagman vanished out of the door into the Great Hall, returning a few moments later, carrying the ancient stone Goblet between them.

Dumbledore looked at the two judges. "Gentlemen, would you be so kind as to go and find Alastor Moody for us, please? I'm sure we'll need his expertise." After the two men left again, Dumbledore closed the door, flicking his wand at it, casting several locking charms and wards.

"What is going on here?" Karkaroff finally muttered. "How can Hogwarts have two champions?"

"I suspect it doesn't." Harry said firmly, aiming his wand at the Goblet. He muttered a long stream of Latin, before chuckling to himself. "Oh, that's clever. Truly a work of art."

Dumbledore mimicked Harry's actions, followed by McGonagall, Snape, Karkaroff and Maxine. Each of them got the same results. "That's a problem." Dumbledore admitted.

"Er... what?" Cedric asked.

"Harry?" Snape said politely. "Would you care to share with Cedric?" He looked at the confusion on Fleur and Viktor's faces. "And the other contenders?"

Harry nodded, noting Cedric's look of shock at Snape's politeness. "There's been two very powerful spells, or enchantments, rather, cast on the Goblet. The first removed the individualisation barrier, and the second was a potent Confundus charm. Very clever work."

"What's the barrier?" Fleur asked.

"How do you make a magical contract be binding, if anyone can throw your name in?" Harry asked rhetorically. "Obviously, you can't. If that was the case, someone could put a 1st years' name in, and they'd have to compete. That's hardly fair, is it, and certainly not binding. The individualisation barrier means that you can only put your own name in. If Cedric had tried to put my name in, it would have simply spat out the piece of parchment."

"So... it makes certain that the person who enters is truly that person." Fleur concluded. "And that enchantment has been removed?"

"Yes." Maxine said. "Clever... and rather diabolical. And the Confundus charm?"

"I would hazard a guess," Snape drawled, "that Mr. Potter was the only contender for a fourth, mythical school. Since the Goblet is a binding magical contract, Harry would be forced to compete."

Fleur looked at him. "I thought you were a glory hound, seeking to be in the tournament for fame and money."

"I have money." Harry replied dismissively. "More than a mere thousand galleons. Christ, I could lose that much down the back of the sofa and not even notice. And fame? I have enough of my own already. No, the question is; what do we do now?"

Dumbledore turned round suddenly, looking at the door. "They are returning. Please do not mention this to anyone else. For the moment, please play along."

The door flicked open, Crouch, Bagman and Moody entering, the last with a 'clump' of his peg-leg on the floor. "What's going on, Albus?" Moody demanded gruffly.

"Hogwarts cheating!" Karkaroff snapped angrily. "Two champions... I have a mind of withdrawing Viktor from this competition right now!"

"Empty threat." Moody growled. "He's got to compete. All of them have."

"Giving 'Ogwartz two chances!" Fleur spat petulantly. "Zis iz unfair!"

"The only person who should complain is Potter." Moody snapped. "And I don't hear him complaining!" He shook his head. "It would have taken an extremely powerful Confundus charm to make that Goblet forget only three schools compete in the tournament."

Harry caught Dumbledore's eye, nodding imperceptibly.

"Thank you, Alastor. Would you arrange for an inspection of the Goblet's staging area? If anyone can find the spell trace signatures, it's you."

Moody nodded. "Aye. I'll find out which cheating scum it was, Albus. Don't you worry about it. You need someone to escort Potter to his dormitory?"

“There are still the rules to cover.” Crouch said in his plummy voice. “I’m sure Potter knows his way to his bedchambers.”

“I’ll be fine, Professor.” Harry said politely. “Thank you, though.”

“My pleasure, Potter.” Moody said, before turning and stomping away.

Crouch cleared his throat. “The first task, a test of your courage and daring, will take place on the 24th of November, in front of your peers and the panel of judges. You shall be allow no items, other than your wand, and you may not ask for help from any member of staff or Ministry official.” He looked at the four. “I think that’s everything. I must return to the Ministry.”

“Oh, come on, Barty!” Bagman said impatiently. “Stick around for a nightcap! It’s all happening here now!”

After Crouch and Bagman had left, bickering good-naturedly, Dumbledore resealed the room. “This is a problem.” He said, before looking at Karkaroff and Maxine. “Thank you, for not sharing my... misgivings.”

“There’s something afoot here, Dumbledore.” Karkaroff said flatly. “I don’t like the idea that I, or one of my students, is being played.”

“Nor I.” Maxine said firmly. “Do you have any suggestions?”

Harry cleared his throat. “Why not just declare the tournament a draw, and pick the names again?”

Dumbledore’s jaw dropped. “An... an excellent idea.” He looked at Karkaroff and Maxine, who nodded. He reached into his pocket, pulling out the four slips of parchment that the Goblet had spat out previously. He took Harry’s in one hand, scrunching it into a ball, and dropping it onto the floor.

He tapped his wand against the Goblet of Fire. “As Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, I hereby declare the Tri-Wizard tournament a draw.”

The Goblet flashed once, before Dumbledore tapped it again, igniting the flames. He threw the three pieces of parchment back in. "It'll take a few moments for it to make the decision." He said.

"Okay, I'll lay five galleons that my name comes out again." Harry said, drawing out his moneybag. "Any takers?"

A resounding 'no' was his reply, prompting him to pout as he tucked the heavy sack back into his robes.

The Goblet flared up, spitting out a piece of parchment. "Viktor Krum." Another slip. "Fleur Delacour." A third slip. "Cedric Diggory." Dumbledore watched the Goblet for a moment, sighing when it flared up a final time, before going out. "Harry Potter."

Said student scowled as he looked around the room. "You rotten bunch of gits! I'd have been forty galleons richer!"

"What do we do?" McGonagall asked. "We can't simply leave Mr. Potter out of the tournament. Since he's been entered, he is supposed to compete."

"What do you wish to do, Harry?" Dumbledore asked tenderly.

Harry raised his arm, pulling back the sleeve of his robe, before tapping his watch. "You been listening in, Hermione?"

"I have." Hermione's soft voice came back.

"You been waiting for me?"

"I am. Just outside, under my cloak."

Snape was already unsealing the door, waiting for her to come in. After a moment, the door shut on its own, the air in front rippling as Hermione pulled off the cloak. "Hello."

"What do you think I should do, Hermione?" Harry asked. "So far, I'm thinking compete. Don't really have much choice."

Hermione stepped forward, pulling Harry into a tight hug. Everyone felt a little misty-eyed as they witnessed the utterly cute scene. She pulled back after a moment. "Fight." She said.

"Fight." Harry agreed. He looked up at Dumbledore. "Looks like I'm the fourth champion, sir."

"Indeed." Dumbledore nodded, a bit sadly. "Now, my boy, I am unable to offer any assistance to you or Mr. Diggory in this competition."

"I understand, sir." Harry replied dutifully.

"However, I'm sure Professor Snape will be able to help you, if he were to volunteer."

"Of course, Albus." Snape said firmly.

"And Mr. Diggory, Professor McGonagall's been known to... bend some rules."

Cedric looked up, grinning at one of his favourite teachers. "I'd be honoured to accept any help you can offer."

McGonagall looked affronted. "I cannot give any student help, Mr. Diggory!" She replied, mock-scandalised. "I can, however, regale you with fascinating tales that may just be of interest to you."

Cedric's grin only widened. "Of course, Professor. My apologies for any... presumption, on my part."

"And obviously," Dumbledore continued, "I have no control over the actions of Headmaster Karkaroff, nor Headmistress Maxine. Nor would allowing all four of you complete access to the entire Hogwarts Library, including the restricted section, be against the rules, since this is a tournament designed to promote co-operation."

Fleur and Viktor suppressed their own smiles. The Hogwarts library was famous around the world for its rich tomes of knowledge. "That would be appreciated, Professor." Fleur said, Krum grunting in agreement.

"With regards to... assistance with the tasks, obviously, we cannot help you. However, I know for a fact that an illicit student gathering on November the 23rd, at approximately 11pm, on the western edge of the lake shore would never happen, would it?"

"No, sir." All five students chanted, making a mental note.

"Good. If I were to hear about such an action, I would be compelled to stop it." He looked sharply over his glasses. "So, please, make sure I don't hear about it."

"Yes, sir." The five chanted again.

"Now... I believe that your fellow students will be awake, waiting with breathless anticipation for you to return. It wouldn't be fair to them, would it, if you were to deprive them of this excellent opportunity to make a great deal of mess and noise?"

Harry, Cedric and Hermione flitted out of the door, Fleur and Viktor following to their own accommodation. "There is one other thing." Dumbledore said, after the students were gone. "I have... concerns, regarding Alastor. He seems... off. Would it be possible for all of us to keep a close eye on him?"

Karkaroff raised an eyebrow. "'Mad-Eye' is renowned for his hatred of the Darkness, Albus. Indeed, it was him that caught me when I was... misguided. He wouldn't turn."

"No, he wouldn't." Dumbledore said heavily. "However, that doesn't mean that he's entirely himself. All I have are... gut feelings. I believe that a little 'constant vigilance' will serve us well."

Harry took a drink of his water. "Huh... Even then, Dumbledore was uncomfortable about Mad-Eye. He was right... as always."

Hermione smiled at the portrait of Dumbledore, who twinkled back. "Since I was listening outside the door, thanks to my communicator, I knew that Harry had pledged an oath, stating he hadn't put his name into the Goblet of Fire. But then, I knew he wouldn't do that anyway."



When we got back to the common room, we had that infamous encounter with Ron...”

Flashback: Fourth Year Boys' Dormitory, Gryffindor Tower, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Monday, 31st October, 1994

Harry had made his way to Gryffindor tower, Hermione walking next to him, under her invisibility cloak. Once inside, Harry had simply walked through the crowded common room, ignoring the chants and cheers people were throwing at him. He's made a short speech (exactly ten words: “I didn't put my name in the Goblet of Fire”) and headed up the stairs. When he entered the dorm room, he spotted Ron sitting on the edge of his bed, looking at Harry disdainfully.

“So, congratulations.”

“What d'you mean, ‘congratulations’?” Harry asked carefully. He just knew that nothing good would come from this conversation. Behind him, he felt Hermione's hand resting lightly on his shoulder, offering his comfort and support.

“You managed to put your name in. No-one else did, not even Fred and George. How'd you do it? The Invisibility cloak?”

“No.” Harry said simply. “The cloak wouldn't have got me past Dumbledore's spell.”

“Hmm...” Ron said dismissively. “Cause if it was the cloak, you could've told me, and we could have done it together. But, you found another way... that you didn't share with me.”

“I didn't enter my name into the Goblet, Ron.” Harry replied firmly. “Your belief or disbelief is irrelevant. I didn't do it. Someone else did.”

“Oh?” Ron asked mockingly, his eyebrows rushing up to his hairline. “Why'd they do that?”

"I don't know, and I don't care, Ron. I didn't do it."

Ron stared at him intently for a moment. "I'm your best mate, Harry. You can tell me the truth."

Harry's eyebrow shot up. He's implying that I'm lying to him? Cheeky shite... also, he thinks he's trustworthy? Ha! "I am telling you the truth, Ron."

"If you don't want anyone else to know, that's fine. I can keep a secret." He sniffed disdainfully, looking a lot like Malfoy. "There's no point in lying, mate. We all know that you've been allowed to enter. All that prize money... and no end of year exams..."

"Your belief, or disbelief, is irrelevant." Harry repeated in a cool voice.

"You should probably get to bed." Ron said angrily. "Probably got some big speech tomorrow."

Ron pulled his legs inside his bed, yanking the curtains closed. Snorting quietly, Harry quickly stripped off and got into bed, pulling and sealing his curtains. Next to him, the invisibility cloak was pulled off Hermione's head.

"I hate this thing..." She muttered. "Always messes up my hair." She looked into his eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Fine." Harry said. "If I gave a crap about anyone's opinion, I might be bothered, but only yours, and some of the teachers, matter to me. He'll come back to me soon enough, begging for forgiveness." He snorted. "Like I care."

"Tell Sirius." Hermione said, tapping his watch.

Rolling his eyes, Harry opened the face of his watch, tapping it with his wand. "Sirius Black."

After a moment of pause, Sirius' appeared on the tiny mirror. "Evening, pup. And hello, Hermione."

“Evening, Sirius.” Hermione said. “You heard?”

The image nodded. “Severus Floo’d me, not ten minutes ago. You know this is trouble, don’t you?”

“When’s it ever different, Padfoot?” Harry asked. “Any ideas?”

Sirius’ image took a moment to think. “A couple of points, pup. Alastor Moody is a world-famous Auror, even if he is retired. Dumbledore’s been seeing signs, same as we have. That missing witch from the Ministry, an ‘unexplained’ death in Little Hangleton... Something’s up, and it’s not good. Your name coming out of the Goblet, not once but twice... it’s mighty odd.”

Harry snorted. “We’re witches and wizards, Sirius. ‘Weird’ is part of the job.”

“True. Do you know what you’re going to do?”

Harry and Hermione exchanged glances, grinning at each other. “I’ll do what I always do.” Harry said firmly. “I’ll stand and fight.”

“The morning afterwards, Hermione got out of bed early, heading down to the Great Hall to grab us some breakfast, so we wouldn’t have to deal with the pointing, mocking and scorn that would head our way. We ate out by the lake, feeding some toast to the Giant Squid.

“At that point, we decided that we should quickly make the communicators for Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall and Snape. Dumbledore gave me his... odd watch, and we put one in. I ordered Professors Snape and McGonagall their own, and quickly put them in.”

“Then the badges.” Hermione hissed malevolently. “Draco sodding Malfoy made badges that said to support Cedric Diggory, with a little ‘Potter Stinks’ message on them.”

“Yes... I was rather proud of that.” Snape said, sighing happily. “I finally got a chance to punish the arrogant little shits. Each person

who wore a 'Potter Stinks' badge got one detention for every day wearing it. Even the Slytherins. It's a shame the house point system wasn't running that year. It would have taken Slytherin decades to recover from that year."

Harry grinned at the portrait, which winked back. "Yes... at the time, I wondered why Dumbledore never stopped them from doing it."

"Ah... unfortunately, Hogwarts By-Law #116 states that students have a right to express themselves in any manner that they see fit, provided it does not harm anyone. Although, I was hoping that you would say that you were upset. I could have done something then."

Harry just shrugged. "It was a brainless cretin spouting on about something he knew nothing about." He thought for a moment. "Which, actually, kinda describes Malfoy to a 'T', doesn't it? Those other people, the older Hufflepuffs, for example, who wore the badges... well, I just ignored them. Their ignorance is their own fault."

Hermione rubbed his back supportively. "We were tempted, at one point, to seek out revenge, but decided against it. There wasn't any point, really. Small-minded bigots weren't important to us."

"The next event of note during this was the Weighting of the Wands ceremony." Harry carried on. "Colin Creevey came and got me from Potions, and I went up to the antechamber, where the other three contenders... I've never understood why we called them 'Champions', instead of 'contenders'... Hmm... Anyway, we got up there, and Ollivander checked our wands. Then, the bitch queen from hell came in..."

Flashback: Fourth Floor Corridor, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Thursday, 3rd November, 1994

Colin was leading Harry up the stairs. "It's really good that you're a champion, Harry." The smaller boy gushed. "I just know you'll win."

"Thanks, Colin." Harry said warily. "I... uh, I appreciate your support."

“Mr. Potter.” A voice called, prompting both boys to stop and turn. Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore were stood there. “Thank you, Mr. Creevey. You’re dismissed. We shall accompany Mr. Potter the rest of the way.”

Colin blushed at being spoken to by two of the greatest people he knew, before dashing away.

“It’s like he’s a poster boy for caffeine.” Harry said casually, before turning to Dumbledore. “Professors. What a delight to see you.”

“Thank you.” Dumbledore replied, twinkling. “Officially, I am not here, Harry. I’m upstairs with Mr. Ollivander at the moment.”

“Oh...” Harry peered at him. “Time turner?”

Dumbledore chuckled. “No. Mr. Ollivander is currently partaking of the facilities, so I thought I’d sneak away. I have come to give you a warning, Harry.”

“Oh?” Harry’s eyes narrowed. “It’s either something you know I’ll hate, or worse... the press.”

“The press.” McGonagall said, smirking at Harry’s groan. “A woman called ‘Rita Skeeter’.”

“The bitch who was trying to rip Arthur Weasley a new one?” Harry groaned. “Let me guess; she’s one of those people who casually makes up lies, which the sheep believe utterly, and then steps back to watch the carnage.”

“Spot on.” Dumbledore confirmed. “I once described her as ‘enchantingly nasty’. She lacks any morals or tact, Harry, and she will want you. You’re one of the biggest celebrities in our world, and she will take great pleasure in tearing your reputation to shreds.”

Harry snorted. “My reputation... like I give a damn about that.” He thought for a moment. “I’m surprised she didn’t write anything ‘enchantingly nasty’ about the whole Chamber of Secrets thing. I’d have thought she’d have been all over me like flies on shi... dung.”

Dumbledore and McGonagall exchanged glances, before McGonagall spoke. "She might have expressed an interest." The older woman said casually. "Of course, reporters are banned from Hogwarts, unless there is a valid reason for them to be here."

"Like a tournament." Harry concluded bitterly. "And now, she's gonna come here and casually destroy lives, digging up every ounce of dirt she can. Marvellous..."

McGonagall cleared her throat, and gestured to the corridor, so they could carry on walking. After a moment, Harry noticed Dumbledore had disappeared, presumably heading back to his office to deal with Ollivander. "Even if you don't speak to her, Harry, she'll make up whatever she likes."

"Fair warning." Harry said agreeably. "So, I'll just ignore her."

Once inside the classroom, where the other champions and judges waited, Ludo Bagman swanned over to Harry. "Ah, here he is! Our fourth champion! Now that you're all here, we'll be conducting the weighing of the wands ceremony. It's where an expert comes in to make certain that your wands are all fully functional, as they're your most important tools in the task."

Ludo heard the sound of someone clearing their throat before continuing. "And there's going to be a photo shoot. This is Rita Skeeter," He jabbed his thumb over his shoulder, where a squat, ugly little witch in magenta robes was loitering, a poisonous smile on her face, "she's doing a small piece on the tournament for the Daily Prophet."

Harry turned, wincing at the horrific robes.

"Maybe not that small, Ludo." Rita said, eyeing Harry hungrily. "I wonder if I could have a word with Harry before we start? You know... the youngest champion... add a bit of colour."

Ludo beamed. "Of course. If young Harry has no objections."

“Splendid.” Rita proclaimed, grabbing Harry by his wrist, and tried to pull him away. She stopped when she realised that he’d dug his heels in.

“I do object.” Harry said flatly. “Unfortunately, Miss Skeeter, I’m not authorised to speak to the press without my agent being available.”

Viktor suppressed a grin as he watched the spectacle, winking at Harry when Rita turned away. Fleur came and stood next to Viktor, grinning widely.

“Oh, I’m sure your agent won’t mind, dear.” Rita said, tugging on his arm. He still didn’t move.

“Oh, I’m sure my agent would mind, dear.” Harry replied mockingly. “Besides, what do you actually need to speak to me for, anyway? According to the scuttlebutt, you’ll make up any damned thing you please, and print that. Please, feel free. You’re a waste of blood and organs as far as I’m concerned, and I’ll say nothing else to you.” He pulled his hand away, and began to turn, before looking back. “Oh, and you can quote me on that.”

Harry stalked away, standing next to his three fellow contenders. “Nicely done, Harry.” Cedric said approvingly.

“Indeed.” Krum agreed. “Couldn’t have done it better myself.”

Fleur nodded, smiling willingly at him. He felt her allure wash over his shields, but they held. “Thank you for standing up for us. I’m sure she’ll write something suitably nasty about you.”

Harry just shrugged. “I’m terrified.” He deadpanned. “Utterly terrified. I have to worry about Dementors, basilisks, Dark Lords and possessed teachers, and yet, a chubby reporter goes top of the list.”

“I am not chubby!” Rita shrieked loudly, looking over at the champions.

“Oh, so sorry.” Harry said obsequiously. “I didn’t know you were eavesdropping.” His sobered up. “Dismissed!” He watched her scurry away. “God, I love doing that.”

Harry grinned happily. “Rita’s newspaper article was just as badly written as Dumbledore warned me. I didn’t speak to her, and yet she reported how my eyes were ‘swimming with the ghosts of my past’. I didn’t care, though. She’s utterly useless as a reporter. She makes shit up, and people believe it.” He shrugged.

“On November 23rd, myself, Harry, Viktor, Fleur and Cedric headed down to the western shore of the lake, as Dumbledore had instructed us. Hagrid was there to ‘persuade’ Harry to pop down, while I trailed behind under my invisibility cloak.” Hermione continued. “Once there, we saw the four dragons, and promptly began to panic.”

“We were nervous.” Harry said. “Dragons are renowned for their combat abilities, not to mention their awesome spell resistance. Me and the other three contenders discussed strategies for a while, knowing that Cedric would transfigure rocks into a distraction, while Fleur put the dragon into a sleep trance, and Viktor tried a Conjunctivitis curse. We all passed.

“My performance in the first task is well known; I summoned my broom and outflew the dragon, which wasn’t easy, since it’s faster than a Firebolt, and nearly as manoeuvrable. Since me and Hermione still had our time-turners, I went back after I got out of the tent along with Hermione, and we watched it from a distance. It was quite an impressive bit of flying, even if I say so myself.”

Hermione snorted and jabbed him with her elbow. “Ego’s never attractive, darling.” She rebuked softly. “So, Harry had collected the egg. Pretty much that evening, we began working on it. It wailed angrily, so we experimented with different ways of finding out what it said.”

“However,” Harry said, looking over at Ron, “just after the task, Ron came up to me, blurting how he believed that someone was trying to kill me by putting my name in the tournament. And it only took him four weeks to come to that conclusion. I told him that I didn’t need to



hear his apology. And it's true; I didn't. Because I knew that it was worthless. All the time I've known him, he's been jealous of me. I knew that he wasn't interested in 'resuming our friendship', since such a thing didn't exist in the first place."

"He just wanted to get back into the spotlight." Hermione concluded. "As the best friend of the 'Boy-Who-Lived', he was a very prominent student, and he liked that. It made him feel important." She gazed down at him in the audience, turning a Vernon-puce. "Something he is not, has never been and will never be."

Harry suppressed a grin as he watched the redhead fume. It was so easy to bait the annoying git. He sighed happily. "The next event of note, that everyone 'knows'," the letters floating above the stage flashed again, "was about the Yule Ball. Professor McGonagall called a house meeting, and told us all about the dance. After everyone else left, Minerva asked me to stay behind..."

Flashback: Transfiguration Classroom, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Friday, 25th November, 1994

"Potter? A word, if you please."

Harry came over, assuming that he was going to get a telling off from his mock-duel with Ron. He didn't really enjoy spending time with Ron, but it was necessary for the charade. "Yes, Professor?"

"Potter, the champions and their partners-"

"Partners?" Harry interrupted.

McGonagall smiled. "Your dance partner, Harry. As a Hogwarts champion, you will have to partake in the opening dance of the Yule Ball."

"Oh... I don't dance, Professor." Harry said shyly. "I've never been taught."

McGonagall grinned at him. "I can teach you, Harry, never fear. Now, you need to make sure you get yourself a suitable partner. Knowing you as I do, I'm sure you'll think of someone."

Harry nodded slowly. "Well... I want to ask the most beautiful girl in the world to go with me, but would she lower herself to go with a fool like me?"

"Hmm... let's have a think about that, shall we?" McGonagall said mockingly. "Does the love of your life want to go with the love of her life to a dance. Hmm..."

Harry opened his watch, tapping it with his wand. "Hermione Granger!" He said firmly.

After a moment, he heard Hermione's voice. "Yes, Harry?"

"I need to ask you something, Hermione. In person. Where are you?"

There was a pause for a moment, before Hermione responded. "I'm outside the classroom, Harry." She admitted. "Would you like me to come in?"

Harry glanced up, spotting McGonagall's broad smile. He chuckled. "Yes, please."

The door opened, revealing a blushing Hermione, who stepped inside. Harry met her halfway, and took her hand. "Hermione, you're the most perfect female on the planet. I'd be honoured if you'd accompany me to the Yule Ball, my lady."

Hermione giggled, before curtsying. "I'd be honoured, my lord." She wrapped him in a tight hug, before pressing a chaste kiss on his lips. They broke apart when they heard McGonagall clearing her throat behind them. "Sorry, Professor."

McGonagall just waved her off. "Don't worry about it. I remember when I was asked by a boy I rather fancied to a ball back in my sixth year." She sighed happily in remembrance. "Good times."

“So... you’ll help me learn to dance, ma’am?” Harry asked.

“Of course, Harry. And please, don’t stand on formality. I’ve been telling you that for ages.” McGonagall complained good-naturedly.

“I’ve had a thought.” Harry said suddenly. He glanced at the two ladies, then tapped his watch. “Albus Dumbledore!”

After a moment, the aged Headmaster responded. “Ah... hello?”

“It’s Harry, Professor.” He grinned. “Still not used to your watch talking to you?”

There was a dry chuckle on the other end of the connection. “I will admit, I find it curious... which is curious in itself, considering I’m used to talking paintings and mirrors that tell me if my hat isn’t on straight. What can I do for you, Harry?”

“I’ve just asked Hermione to the Yule Ball, sir,” Harry said, smiling at the young lady in question, “and she was gracious enough to accept.”

“Ah... Harry, where are you at the moment?”

“I’m in Professor McGonagall’s classroom, sir.” Harry said with polite confusion. “Is there a problem, sir?”

“I’ll be there in a few moments, Harry.” Dumbledore said as he closed his watch.

Dumbledore was, as usual, true to his word. A bare minute later, he was striding through the door into the Transfiguration classroom, which he shut firmly behind him, before casting a few secrecy and silencing spells.

“Is there a problem, sir?” Harry asked.

“Potentially.” Dumbledore said, as he sat down on one of the student desks. “As we are all aware, the dreams you’ve been having about Voldemort indicate, to me, at least, that he is still alive. Your

Occlumency is exceptional, but there are other ways for Voldemort to gain information. If it becomes widely known that Miss Granger is attending the Ball with you, she stands to become a target.”

Harry arched an eyebrow, feeling a ball of anger begin to form in his stomach. “And what do you suggest, sir?”

“Retract your claws, Harry.” Dumbledore said with a chuckle. “I would not dream of interfering with your relationship, or your date for the Ball. What I would ask, however, is that you allow us to continue the charade of not being with Miss Granger.”

The ball of anger faded slightly. “In what way?” He felt Hermione move closer to him, taking his hand.

“If we were to put a Confundus charm over the doorway, along with a selective memory charm, people would believe that you attended the Ball with someone else, thus protecting Miss Granger.”

“That makes sense.” Harry said slowly. “So, I’ll be going with Hermione, but people will think that I went with someone else.” He frowned as something occurred to him. “Who are you going to put me with?”

Dumbledore shrugged. “Entirely your choice, Harry.”

“Parvati.” Hermione said immediately. “She’ll be telling people for months afterwards about her excellent date with the ‘Boy-Who-Lived’.”

Harry grimaced, then nodded. “I suppose. Out of curiosity, why not Lavender?”

“She’s blonde.” Hermione sniffed disdainfully. “I know that you don’t like blondes.”

Harry smiled at Hermione. “So, that was the Ball. Cedric had already told me that he was going with Cho, but we wanted to make our ruse more believable, so I went and asked Cho if she’d accompany me to the Ball. Layers upon layers. She was apologetic, but told me that

she was going with Cedric. Then, the Ball. I went with Hermione, who was clad in a stunning dress. We had a marvellous time.”

A voice from near the back cleared their throat. Harry looked over, to see Padma Patil standing up. “Sorry to interrupt. May I ask a question?”

Harry nodded. “Sure, Padma.”

“If you didn’t go with Parvati, who did?”

Hermione stepped closer. “It was a big, buff guy from Durmstrang. Marcus... Marko... I think. From what she told us, she had a marvellous time.”

Padma glanced down at her sister, who was sitting quietly next to her. “But...”

“I knew.” Parvati said quietly, but still loudly enough to be heard in the utterly silent hall. “Marko came up to me, asking me about an hour after the announcement. Professor Dumbledore came to see me, and asked me to help in the ruse. I agreed. I kept my memories, although I was under a secrecy spell not to reveal the truth. I didn’t have a problem with it. I had a cracking night, and kept in touch with my date.”

Harry just grinned. “I had a great night, too. Me and Hermione danced all night.” He sighed happily in remembrance. “What was kinda not surprising was that Viktor and Fleur went together. Although, really, it made sense. Both of them knew that if people asked them, they’d be wanting either Krum’s fame, or Fleur’s allure. By going together, they bypassed that whole thing.”

“I still remember Ron’s ‘proposal’.” Hermione said, smiling slightly. “‘Hey, Hermione... you’re a girl...’ Utterly useless prat.”

“I, of course, already knew that.” Harry said pompously. “And enjoyed that fact on many occasions.” He winked salaciously at Hermione, who blushed, and blew a raspberry at him. “And we had a marvellous evening. Of course, Ron’s tantrum afterwards was entertaining. How

dare she go with someone else to a ball? How dare she not just wait for him to get his finger out of his arse and ask her?" He shook his head. "All in all, it was an entertaining night."

"And then, the true betrayals began to start." Hermione said heavily. "Thanks to Professor Dumbledore's portrait surveillance network, we overheard Ron and Ginny having a conversation. They were... annoyed, that we weren't desperately in love with them. Ron wanted me, so that I could do his homework and exams for him, and also, he considered me so plain that I would happily sleep with him, just 'cause 'a strapping, virile pureblood' like him would want me."

"Ginny," Harry continued, "on the other hand, wanted me for quite different reasons. The Potter wealth is considerable, and being the girlfriend of one of the most famous wizards of the last century would net her fame and spotlight. They wrote to their Mum, requesting information about 'enticing' us."

"Of course," Hermione took over the speaking, "the 'enticement' was actually love potions. We'd been suspecting this on and off for nearly two years, and were already taking a neutraliser potion, courtesy of Severus."

Severus looked over at the now-snarling Ron Weasley. "It was entirely my pleasure, I assure you."

"Ours, too." Harry and Hermione chirped in unison. Harry continued. "Still, we weren't interested in them. Good lord, we'd been together at this point for over three years." He turned and smiled soppily at Hermione. "Three marvellous, wonderful years."

Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "You soppy git." She replied warmly. "By this point, even my Mum and Dad were beginning to see Harry as their son-in-law. They didn't have a problem with it. Dad was a bit annoyed at first when he learned just how... close we were, but when he met Harry, he could tell that he was a stand-up guy."

Both took a moment to reminisce, before carrying on. "Severus told Albus, who added yet another function to our watches; potion detectors. Every time they detect Amortentia, they begin vibrating.

This will become more important later on.” He sighed to himself. “We quickly figured out that the Second Task involved recovering something from the Lake. Professor Dumbledore came to speak to me, telling me that the Tri-Wizard judges, mainly Crouch and Bagman, had decided that Hermione would be going into the lake for me. I discussed it with Hermione, and she agreed, since Professor Dumbledore confirmed that none of the hostages would come to harm.”

Hermione nodded. “I didn’t, either. I went to bed on the 23rd of February, and woke up in the rather cold lake. All in all, not one of my better night’s sleep. So, I went down for Harry...” She gave him a dirty grin, which he returned with interest, “while little Gabrielle Delacour was down there for Fleur. Viktor’s brother Aleksandr... I think that’s how you pronounce it, was tied to the rock for him, while Cho was Cedric’s hostage. Suffice to say, Ron did not go down, and he was... convinced otherwise. An Aguamenti spell and a slight memory charm, as he was convinced.”

The Potters looked over at Ron, who’d bypassed standard colours, and was now turning a beautiful fluorescent purple. Both were secretly impressed.

“Tell them the truth.” Snape’s portrait called up suddenly. “Since I’m apparently the villain of this story, I want to make sure I get full credit.”

“Sorry.” Harry said apologetically. “Professor Severus Snape was the ‘evil’ person who modified Ron’s mind. It was fairly simple, too. A quick Legilimens and memory charm, a small compulsion to not talk about the task, and Ron was convinced. It was a lovely piece of work.” Without looking up, Harry added, “And shut up, Percy. We’re not interested.”

“So, by the end of February, Harry Potter was in joint first place in the Tri-Wizard tournament, despite being nearly three years younger than the other competitors. And he was still dealing with a twelve-class course load, and additional training.” Hermione said proudly. “My hero...”

Harry pouted at her for a moment, before turning back to the crowd. "The next slightly... different note occurred during Easter. Rita Skeeter had been printing horrifically biased and damaging articles in the Daily Prophet, simply because she could. Bitch. She was writing all her lies and scandals, causing Hermione to receive hate-mail, and even physically damaging items by post. Had I seen Skeeter then, I would have killed her on the spot."

His gaze locked on the suddenly-nervous blonde. "I still might. As the Head of two Ancient Houses, I can call upon you at any time, Skeeter. Remember that."

"More importantly," Hermione interjected, her eyes hardened chips of hazel, "so can I. And I assure you, bitch, that Harry is positively forgiving compared to me." She glanced at Harry. "Easter."

"Easter." He confirmed. "We received chocolate eggs from Mrs. Weasley. Again, a patronising and insulting gift... considering neither of us is particularly fond of chocolate. I received a dragon's egg, while Hermione got a chicken's egg... and both of which were liberally laced with Amortentia. Fortunately, both Ron and Ginny are thick, and completely forgot to bind the potion to themselves. So, we just had raw Amortentia running through our veins, which was completely neutralised before it could work."

"I remember that." Snape said fondly. "I felt positively gleeful when I ate some of that egg."

"Moving on." Hermione said quickly. She remembered the conversation they'd had, and Severus' admission, and neither wanted to go over it. "Naturally, we reported the situation to our faculty advisors. It's actually a criminal offence to use love potions. Sure, it's joked about, and under some circumstances it's tolerated, but it's still illegal. All three of them could have been arrested for their actions."

"Should have been." Harry muttered. "Still, we now had the truth of the Weasley family; they wanted us, and were quite prepared to trample all over us to get it." He shook his head. "Anyway... myself and Hermione kept practicing for the Third Task. When Bagman came to take us all down to the Quidditch pitch, we knew that it was a



maze we were facing, along with a number of Hagrid's creatures, read: monsters, enchantments, that bloody Sphinx who was annoyingly clever..."

"Naturally, Harry pissed all over it." Hermione said. "The only reason he didn't win outright was his sense of fair play. Krum was under Moody's Imperius, and he tortured Fleur. Cedric was trapped by Devil's Snare, and Harry could have simply walked on. He didn't. He did the right thing... and Cedric died because of it."

Rita Skeeter stood up. "You've never told the people what actually happened in that graveyard."

"No, I haven't. I told the people who needed to know, Skeeter. You are not, never have been, and never will be one of those people."

"The people-" Skeeter began.

"Shut up." Hermione said flatly. "You have no right to comment on our actions. You're supposed to be an investigative journalist. Investigate." She smirked evilly. "Of course... you have to survive the rest of the day, though."

Harry nodded slowly. "Unlikely, Hermione."

Skeeter sat down before she fell down, her legs were shaking that badly.

"Now... where were we? Ah, yes. The graveyard..."

Flashback: Little Hangleton Cemetery, Little Hangleton, Yorkshire  
Saturday, 24th June, 1995

Cedric and Harry landed with a thump, the Portkey trophy rolling away to one side. Harry snapkicked himself to his feet, pulling his wand out. "Battle ready, Ced." He muttered. "Don't like this." He glanced down at his wrist, noting that his communicator had been

smashed due to the impact. He sighed to himself, as he realised help wouldn't be coming that way.

The older boy pulled himself up, drawing his wand. "You're not alone there."

Harry closed his eyes, scrunching up his face as he concentrated on sending out a pulse of magic.

"What the hell..." Cedric said, feeling magic washing over him. "What was that?"

"Magic." Harry replied distantly. "Okay, not counting us, we have a number of magical signatures. Two wands. A magical creature of some kind, small, but high potential. One adult wizard. One... thing that I don't have a bloody clue about."

Cedric immediately spun round, stepping backwards a pace, to stand back-to-back with Harry. "Any guesses where we are?"

"Sadly, yes." Harry replied. "Can you apparate?"

"Yeah?" Cedric replied.

"Good. Apparate out, head to Hogwarts. Land in front of the gates, and run up to the school."

"I can't leave you here." Cedric protested immediately.

"Cedric, go!"

With a huff, the older boy flicked his wand, only to stay still. "Shit... there must be some kind of anti-apparition ward around."

Harry was immediately searching the ground. "The trophy..."

"Kill the spare..." A hoarse voice called.

"Avada Kedavra!" Wormtail flicked his wand.

Harry immediately shoved Cedric to the ground, rolling out of the way as a green curse passed the area he'd been standing in less than a second before. Cedric quickly got back to his feet, before another curse splashed against his chest, the green light highlighting him for a moment.

"No!" Harry screamed, aiming his wand. "Reducto, Stupefy, Incarcerous, Bombarda!" The four spells launched from Harry's wand like missiles, prompting Wormtail to drop the thing in his arms to the ground as he fell backwards. Truly, not the most graceful way of dodging powerful spells, but sufficient to save his tubby neck.

A small, green hand emerged from the dirty rags Wormtail had dropped, wiggling the fingers slightly. Harry froze as his nervous system locked up, giving Wormtail enough time to cast a Stupefy. Harry slumped, his nervous system released.

Harry cleared his throat. "Cedric died because both of us were unprepared. No-one knew that even in his homunculus form, Voldemort could use wandless magic. It wasn't very powerful, but it was enough to freeze me in place while I was stunned." He sighed. "Felt a bit of a prick afterwards, too. I got caught off guard by a bloody homunculus. The rest of it's pretty simple. Got tied to a gravestone. Wormtail used my blood in a necromantic potion to give Voldemort a new body. He arose. We fought, it was a draw, I ran. Grabbed Cedric's body and the Portkey, and came back to Hogwarts.

"And here where the story gets very interesting. I immediately told Dumbledore what had happened. Fudge was on the grounds, watching the tournament. We told him what had happened, and what did he do?"

Hermione opened the attaché case on the podium, pulling out a small notebook. It was quickly enlarged to A4 size. "First of all, Fudge was informed that a high-profile Death Eater had been caught on school grounds. This man, who was another escapee of Azkaban prison, should have been incarcerated, interrogated and executed for his crimes. Instead, Fudge brought in a bloody Dementor, who kissed the man instantly. No proper interrogation, no confession, nothing."

Harry cleared his throat, leaning over his wife's shoulder as he carried on reading. "Next, Chief Warlock Dumbledore made several sensible suggestions regarding Ministry policy. He advised to get rid of the Dementors, since they'd naturally follow Voldemort, and send envoys to the giants, to keep them out of the way."

"Of course," Hermione took over the monologue, "Fudge did none of these things. Instead, he told Dumbledore that Voldemort couldn't come back, and then left, taking the Dementor with him. And that was it. He didn't investigate, he didn't send Aurors to Little Hangleton, he didn't question the men who Harry mentioned... he just... walked away."

"And then... the Weasleys came to see me in the Hospital Wing..."

Flashback: Hospital Wing, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Saturday, 24th June, 1995

Harry lay on his traditional bed, the one furthest from the doors, feeling sorry for himself. He felt a modicum of guilt, yeah, but not the all-encompassing wave people seemed to be expecting. He knew it was Cedric's choice to take the cup, Barty Crouch's for putting his name in the blasted Goblet in the first place, Voldemort's for ordering the death and Wormtail's for 'pulling the trigger'. In the grand scheme of things, it wasn't really him, although he shared a small fraction of the blame.

Still, he felt awful. The slashed leg from fighting the Acromantula hurt, not to mention the dirty knife Wormtail had used to extract his blood. Silly git hadn't bothered to clean the thing for ever, it felt like. Not to mention multiple Cruciatus curses from the Dork Lardarse himself. They stung.

Hermione had been clutching onto his hand the entire time he'd been brought up to the hospital wing, and during Fudge's pouting denials. "Are you okay, Harry?"

He winced as he shifted positions, the barely-scabbed over wound on his left beginning to bleed again. "Yeah, I'll be okay. Bit tender at the moment, though." He sighed as he held up his left arm. "And my watch got damaged."

She released his right hand, reaching up gently to unclasp the watch from his wrist. "I can fix the cracks now, but I'll need to look up the enchantments on the communication mirror and the Amortentia detector."

A cleared throat announced the presence of Albus Dumbledore. "I've just shrugged the Minister off for a few moments, and Sirius is taking a quick shower in guest quarters before he comes to see you, Harry. Could I be of assistance with your watch while we wait?"

He held out his hand, summoning the broken watch to himself. It took the old man just under a minute to repair the damage, and replace the enchantments.

"You know..." Harry drawled, "it's annoying just how good you are at this sort of stuff, sir."

Dumbledore chuckled. "After nearly sixteen decades, young whippersnapper, I should hope I am good at 'this sort of stuff'. Of course, in five, maybe ten years, you'll easily surpass my meagre accomplishments."

Harry snorted. "Yeah... right."

"Good." Dumbledore said cheerfully. "I'm glad you agree. And you, Miss Granger." He watched Hermione roll her eyes. "Now, I spotted the Weasleys in the stands earlier, and I believe they wish to come and see you, Harry. I would advise 'constant vigilance' for the moment."

"Agreed." Harry and Hermione replied in unison. "That reminds me, where's the real Mr. Moody?"

"I believe he was engaging in a battle of wits with Madam Pomfrey over whether he could recuperate in his quarters or the hospital wing."

Again, Harry snorted. "Sorry, but he's got no hope of beating 'I'm right' Pomfrey." He watched as Dumbledore quickly vanished under a disillusionment charm.

The doors opened, revealing the healer in question, tugging on a battered and dishevelled Alastor Moody. "Damned right, Harry." The healer said. "Are you gonna give me any trouble?"

"I don't dare." Harry said genuinely. "Argue with you, Poppy? It'd just be proof that I'm a nut."

"Good." Poppy said smugly. "Now, let me get Alastor into a bed when he's stopped trying to sneak out..." She turned slowly, seeing a rather sheepish Moody stood at the door, trying to sneak out. "And then we can get sorted."

Grumbling under his breath, Moody stomped to a bed, near-throwing himself onto it, before pulling up the blankets. When Poppy handed him a vial of potion, he glared at her mutinously. "Oh, for Merlin's sake!" Poppy snapped. "I've known you for 38 years, Alastor! Do you really think I'd try and poison you?"

Still grumbling, Moody swallowed the contents, before collapsing backwards, and starting to snore.

Poppy took the vial. "Not poison you, but I will knock you out." She said smugly, as she adjusted his blankets, and stepped away. "Now, Mr. Potter. What do you need?"

"Sutures and an anti-Cruciatuus." He said bluntly.

While Pomfrey worked, a small crowd quickly made their way into the hospital wing. A black dog, which was still wet, Severus Snape, who was sneering at all and sundry, and the majority of the Weasley family.

“Harry dear!” Molly wailed as she rushed forward, trying to wrap the young man in a smothering hug. Harry gritted his teeth as Molly tried to squeeze him. “I was so worried about you!”

“I’m fine, Mrs. Weasley.” Harry said emotionlessly. “Thank you for asking.”

“You know how I worry, Harry.” Molly simpered.

Harry and Hermione caught each other’s eyes as they both pondered exactly why she worried, but neither had time to say anything else as the doors to the hospital wing slammed open, revealing a furious Minerva McGonagall and a red-faced Cornelius Fudge. “...is Dumbledore? Why isn’t he here to answer my questions?”

“What is going on?” Dumbledore asked, stepping through the still-swinging door. Clearly, he’d sneaked just outside the door so he could make his entrance. He was a showman at heart, really. “Cornelius? Why are you disrupting patients?” He turned to McGonagall. “Who have you got guarding Barty Crouch?”

“No-one!” McGonagall snapped angrily. “There’s no bloody need! This idiot,” She gestured furiously at Fudge, “brought a Dementor into the school! A Dementor! As soon as it walked into the room, it kissed Crouch, instantly!”

Dumbledore’s no-longer twinkling eyes turned to Fudge. “Why did you bring a Dementor onto Hogwarts grounds, Cornelius? You know my views on the vile creatures.”

Fudge glared angrily. “I am the Minister of Magic, Dumbledore, and I’ll thank you to remember that! If I feel the need for protection against dangerous lunatics, I will bring it!” He huffed for a moment. “Besides, some crackpot fool who says he’s working on You-Know-Who’s orders... we all know that You-Know-Who is dead!”

Harry cleared his throat. “Minister... you know that Voldemort’s not dead, and I can prove it. Last year, when you went to the Three Broomsticks, you told Madam Rosmerta that he was still alive. What was it you said?” Harry closed his eyes to ponder for a moment. “Ah,

yes; 'powers gone, horribly weakened, he fled'. You know he's not yet dead. Why do you deny his return?"

Everyone in the hospital wing was silent as they watched a small fourteen-year old tell off the most important man in magical Britain... and he did it using fact.

"That was a private conversation!" Fudge snapped.

"In the middle of a crowded pub." Harry pointed out reasonably. "And you didn't answer my question. If you know that Voldemort's not dead, why are you denying the fact that he could be re-embodied now?"

"He can't be..." Fudge whispered, before sobering up. "I've read all about you, Potter. Having fits all over the castle, speaking Parseltongue... the mark of a Dark wizard, boy. I know your game. You want to do everything you can to destabilise the Ministry."

"No." Harry said softly. "I want everyone to live, and be happy. But that won't happen with Voldemort running around."

"Cornelius." Dumbledore interjected smoothly. "This is time for action, swift, decisive action. So far, you've already cost us a great source of information by having Barty Crouch Junior kissed. I implore you to make no more mistakes. Remove the Dementors from Azkaban. Send envoys to the giants, the werewolves and the vampires. Do this, and we may have a chance in the war that is to come. Fail to act, and you could cost us everything."

"The giants?" Fudge repeated. "Are you mad? I won't contact a bunch of dirty beasts on the say-so of a lunatic, attention-seeking child! And the Dementors? Half of the Wizarding world only sleeps well at night because the Dementors guard Azkaban."

"And the other half of us cower in fear." Dumbledore retorted. "Cornelius, I beg of you to do this. Yes, it will be an unpopular decision, and yes, it may well cost you some votes, but when the truth comes out, you'll be regarded as a hero."



"He can't be back." Fudge said, near pleading. "He just can't be..." He reached into his cloak pocket, pulling out a sack of galleons, which he quickly dropped on Harry's bed. "Your winnings, young Potter. There was going to be a ceremony, but now... No." He looked up at Dumbledore. "We shall speak in the morning, Dumbledore. There may well soon be some changes here at Hogwarts." He swept out of the room, McGonagall and Snape following to make sure the officious arse got out.

Dumbledore sighed. "This will be... troublesome." He looked up at the Weasleys. "Molly, can I count on you and Arthur?"

"Of course, Albus." Molly said firmly. "We both know what Fudge is, really. It's because of him that Arthur's never been promoted, because of his love of Muggles. We all stand with you, Albus."

"Excellent." Dumbledore quickly outlaid a plan of recruitment from the Ministry, sending Bill Weasley on his way.

"Now, Padfoot, if you would reveal yourself?" Dumbledore stared at the dog, which quickly transformed.

"Sirius Black!" Molly screamed, drawing her wand from her pocket.

"Mum, stop!" Ron demanded. "It's okay. He's a good guy. It wasn't him."

After Molly had been mollified (!), she turned back to Dumbledore, who was watching the doors to the hospital wing. A moment later, they opened, revealing Severus and Minerva.

"Black!" Snape sneered, reaching for his wand. "Not dead yet?"

Sirius quickly responded. "No... you've failed again, you greasy bat!"

"Enough!" Dumbledore roared. "You are on the same side, and you will act like it! For the moment, I will settle for a lack of open hostility. Now, shake hands."

The two men grasped hands for a moment, before dropping them to their sides, scrubbing them on their trouser legs, as though trying to remove the taint. "That will do. Now, Severus... you know what I must ask of you."

Snape nodded. "I do, Headmaster. I shall leave immediately."

"Sirius, would you be so kind as to gather up the old crowd, and head to Remus' place?"

"Right away, Albus." Sirius said firmly, before turning to Harry. "I have to go, pup. I'll be in touch, though." Discretely, he trapped the shiny Rolex on his wrist. Harry nodded imperceptibly, before Padfoot reappeared, bounding out of the doors like a puppy.

"This has been a rather trying evening for young Harry." Dumbledore said, eyeing the Weasleys sharply. "I would suggest that we allow him some rest."

Molly smothered Harry in another hug (prompting more gnashing teeth), and stalked out of the hospital wing, sniffing dramatically about 'the poor boy'. Ron gave Harry a light glare, before following his mum out without a word.

Ginny stepped closer, smiling in what she clearly thought was a seductive manner. "Get well soon, Harry." She said in a disturbingly unnatural voice. "I'll come and see you tomorrow."

Oh, joy. Harry thought. "Thank you, Ginny." Harry said coolly. "Good night."

The twins were next. "Well done, old chap." They said together. "All that prize money to enjoy." The each clapped a hand on his shoulder, before leaving, just Severus, Dumbledore, McGonagall and Hermione with Harry.

"Anyone else a little freaked out?" Harry asked, of no-one in particular. Four hands raised. "Yeah, I thought so..."

“What disturbs me,” McGonagall said tentatively, “is how they focussed on the prize money, not Mr. Diggory.”

“Right there with you on that one.” Snape said, nodding quickly. “Anyway, I must get ready to depart shortly. I’ve been called back to Voldemort’s side.” He looked at Dumbledore. “Albus, Igor’s in my office, about to wet himself in fear. I believe it would be good to get him out of the way, and into a safe house. He’s of no use to anyone at the moment.”

“Very well.” Dumbledore stopped at the door. “Harry? Hermione?” The teens looked up. “Get some sleep. You’ll need it.”

“And boy, did we.” Harry said flatly. “Hell of a Saturday that was... That was pretty much the end of fourth year. There was a day or so left before we all headed home, and we’d been assigned a shed-load of homework. Unlike the other champions, I did take my end of year exams, and passed them all, naturally. I was the second-ranking student in my year... after my bodacious wife, of course.”

She blushed at him. “To be honest, both of us were looking forward to the summer. It had been one hell of a stressful year. We were looking forward to lying out on the patio, big glasses of lemonade and snuggling, while we recuperated. Of course, no-one can predict the future.

“Then, the train-ride home. Everyone knows,” above Hermione’s head, the floating letters flashed yet again, “that Harry gave the Weasley twins the G1,000 prize money. Well... not exactly...”

Flashback: Hogwarts Express, passing into London

Sunday, 25th June, 1995

Ron struggled out of the compartment, stepping over Crabbe and Goyle. “Fred, George... wait up a sec.” Harry called out.

Hermione quickly closed the door, pulling down the shutter.

Harry opened his trunk, pulling out the sack with the Tri-Wizard winnings. "You were telling us about Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes... would G1,000 help get business off the ground?"

Both twins eyes locked on the dangling sack (A/N: Isn't that the kind of phrase that could get underage children in trouble?) in Harry's hand. "Yeah..." The breathed together. "And you're just... giving this to us?"

"No." Harry said. "I'm proposing that we set up a business contract between yourselves and me. I'll loan you this money, in return for a cut of the business."

Hermione was watching the twins carefully, using her fledging Legilimency ability on them. While the were conferring, she leaned in close to Harry, flicking her wand to create a cone of silence around them. "They're planning to take the money, and arrange to give you one Knut from every five Galleons they make, as your cut of the profit."

Harry's eyebrow shot up. "Cheeky buggers. That's what... one twentieth of a percent? Ten pence for every two hundred and fifty quid they make? I don't think so. It'll be fifty/fifty, or nothing."

Fred looked up at Harry. "Okay, Harry. We're prepared to accept the money, in return for giving you shares in the business, and a percentage of the profits."

Nodding slowly, Harry dispelled the cone of silence. "That sounds good, in principle. What shares and what percentage?"

The twins, for a moment, locked eyes. "That's something we could work out at a later stage, Harry, surely?"

"We could, yeah." Harry agreed amiably. "But we won't. Here and now, or I walk."

Hermione was busy scribbling something down on a sheet of parchment, which she passed to Harry. He quickly read it through and signed, pricking his thumb with the sharp edge of the quill and

allowing a drop of blood to fall over his signature. The blood was quickly absorbed into the parchment.

“Gentlemen, if you’d sign at the bottom?” Harry asked, offering the parchment over.

Fred and George quickly read through it.

#### The Contract:

This Joint Venture Agreement made and entered into on this date, 25th June, 1995, by Harry James Potter and Frederick Weasley and George Weasley, of Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes.

- The purpose of the joint venture is to open and maintain a joke and pranking supply shop, named Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes, to be run by Owl-order and a counter service.
- Harry James Potter shall provide G1,000 to Frederick and George Weasley as start-up capital for the business. No further capital shall be supplied by this investor.
- The G1,000 capital shall be used solely for the supplies and other items necessary for Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes.
- Frederick Weasley and George Weasley shall be responsible for the creation and retail of all merchandise and products retailed by Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes. Harry James Potter is not responsible for concept, creation or final resale of any products.
- Commencing on the date of 25th June, 1995, and ending upon the termination of this agreement, all net profits, after the payment of taxes, wages and wholesale cost of company supplies, shall be split between Harry James Potter and Frederick and George Weasley in the following percentages: Harry James Potter: 50; Frederick Weasley: 25; George Weasley: 25. The distribution shall occur whenever profits are deposited at Gringotts bank. The profits of Harry James Potter shall automatically be sent to Gringotts vault #1194, while the Weasley deposit their profits in their own vault.
- Harry James Potter, as sole investor to Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes, shall be provided with any supplies, products or merchandise he or his proxy requires, at no charge to himself. This article will be in effect for the lifetime of the agreement.
- This Business Venture Agreement shall be confidential, with Frederick and George Weasley undergoing a contracted Obliviate, if and when required.

After reading, the twins shrugged, deciding that they would simply report inaccurate profits to ensure they got their fair share, signed the parchment, and pricked their thumbs, allowing the blood to fall. The instant it hit the parchment, the document flashed and seethed for a moment, before settling down. Hermione's wand flicked at the twins. "Obliviate! Obliviate!" The contract vanished from their minds as Harry handed over the large bag of gold.

"There you go, gentlemen. G1,000. I look forward to the wheezes." He stood up, quickly rolling up the parchment and thrusting it into his pocket. "See you around."

Hermione quickly followed, passing them out of the door. She could see the greed on the twins' faces as they stared at the bag. With a slight sneer, she left the compartment, rushing off the train to find her parents.

"And we went home." Hermione concluded. "That night, Harry came over to my place, and we spent the whole night talking, cuddled up together. He told me everything. Every sight, every sound, every smell... everything." She felt Harry's arm snake around her waist supportively.

"So..." He glanced at the portraits.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "I feel compelled to point out at this moment, Harry, just how accomplished you both were at this time. You were both post-OWL level in all seven core subjects, and the electives you had taken. You could easily have passed the OWLs, and several NEWTs. Not to mention that both of you were ready for Prefectships, Occlumency masters and expert flyers. Not even Voldemort, when he was a student, was as powerful or prepared as you two were, at a mere fourteen and fifteen years old."

Lily looked at Harry, a small grin on her face. "Well... you were better than me, and James. Hell, combined. A pair of bright stars..."

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "You forgot to mention that I again offered to tell you of the prophecy, Harry. Both of you were more than adequate Occlumens to hide the information."

Harry nodded. "Oh, yeah." He turned back to the audience. "Albus had been offering, on and off, for three full years to tell me of the prophecy. He explained that Voldemort was a Legilimens, and that he'd be probing my mind, and that I'd need to keep my barriers up. I decided not to listen to it. I knew I had to train, and prepare. The first salvo in the war had been fired, and Cedric Diggory took the hit. It was our time to prepare for the fight."

## – CHAPTER FIVE –

School Year: 1995-1996

The Great Hall, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Saturday, 1st August, 1998

Silence reigned in the Great Hall. The Tri-Wizard Tournament was covered extensively in the Daily Prophet, not to mention muckracking from Rita Skeeter had made accurate reporting impossible. No-one really knew what had gone on, and the two heroes on the stage had never told before.

“Excuse me...” A timid-looking woman at the back stood up. “Sorry, can I just clarify something?”

Harry squinted slightly, before his face softened. “Of course, Mrs. Diggory. What would you like to know?”

“We thought...” She cleared her throat, quickly rubbing her eyes. “We thought that Cedric was killed instantly.”

“No.” Harry smiled warmly. “I told Cedric to leave, but he didn’t want to. We fought Voldemort and Wormtail for a few moments, but both of us were tired and injured from making our way through the maze. Neither of us was in top form, and we were facing superior opponents. Cedric died fighting for his life, ma’am. His and mine. He was a true Champion.”

She nodded, then sat down.

“So... where were we?” Harry asked, looking at Hermione, who held up her notebook.

“We spent the summer learning and training.” She said firmly. “Again, we stuck to the same arrangement as before. Harry would Portkey across to my place, or I’d go to his. We were beginning to focus on the more combat-oriented magicks.”



Again, the vile Skeeter woman rose to her feet, but she looked a lot more polite and respectful than before. "May I ask a question regarding your academics?"

"You may." Hermione said, her tone like ice.

"You said that you'd been doing extra-curricular studying since the end of your first year. At this point in your tale, you've just completed your fourth year. At what level were you?"

Harry turned several pages in the notebook. "That was a polite question, Skeeter, so we'll answer it." He said absently. "By the conclusion of our fourth year, both Hermione and myself had sufficient knowledge to take our NEWT exams in Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, Charms, Defence Against the Dark Arts, History of Magic, Muggle Studies, Potions and Transfiguration. We were the equivalent of sixth years in Astronomy, Care of Magical Creatures and Herbology."

Clearing her throat, Hermione pointed to another column in the book. "We were also classed as 'Masters' in Occlumency and Broomstick Handling. I was becoming proficient in Legilimency, since Harry can't actually perform that branch of magic. Both of us could apparate, although we were both a bit slow and rather noisy at it. We'd both had basic first aid training, courtesy of Madam Pomfrey, and both of us could detect almost any magical signature or trap."

Rita's quill was moving frantically over the page. "In other words, you were both pretty much graduates by the end of your fourth year."

Harry and Hermione looked at each other for a moment, before nodding casually. "Pretty much, yeah. Of course, neither of us had taken any of our exams, but thanks to the Professors, we knew what level we were at. We'd worked hard to get where we were."

Rita sat down, speaking in a low voice to her parchment, which began scribbling again.

"That was a long summer." Harry said, seemingly out of the blue. "Hermione was receiving the Daily Prophet, reading all the articles

about me being an attention-seeking liar and lunatic. I wasn't particularly bothered about it, really. As I stated earlier, the only people who's opinions mattered to me knew the truth, and they supported me.

"Officially, I was pretty much left alone during that summer. The Weasleys barely wrote to me, basically sending me letters that said they couldn't tell me anything, which was a bit of a waste of parchment, really. One day, Ronald Weasley may actually remember that I don't support the Chudley Cannons. Puddlemere's my team, for rather obvious reasons."

In the crowd, Oliver Wood grinned.

"I received some great presents for my birthday, the majority of which was spent at Hermione's house. Her parents threw me a small party, which my Professors, Sirius, Remus and Albus attended. I slept at Hermione's that night, going back to the Dursleys the following day. Then..."

"The Dementor attack." Hermione concluded. "The day after Harry's birthday, August 1st, Professor Dumbledore arranged for both myself and my parents to be moved to Grimmauld Place, while a pair of Healers under Polyjuice took over at their dental surgery. Mum and Dad stayed in a warded part of Grimmauld, on the third floor. When I heard about the attack, I immediately called Harry. He explained the situation as he was lugging his fat cousin home..."

Flashback: Magnolia Crescent, Little Whinging, Surrey  
Wednesday, 2nd August, 1995 - 21:08

"Hermione Granger." Harry gasped as he tapped his wand on his watch.

"Harry? What's up?" Hermione's voice came back a few moments later.

“Just been attacked by Dementors, babe.” Harry replied, desperately wishing for a drink of water. “Two of them. Scared them off with Prongs.”

“Are you okay? Dementors? In Surrey? What the hell are they doing there?” Her voice was rapidly getting faster and higher-pitched.

“Hermione.” Harry said firmly. “I’m fine. I’m not injured. Dudley’s a bit the worse for wear, but he’ll be okay. He doesn’t have any Occlumency to protect him.”

“Harry, you need to tell Dumbledore, now.”

Harry sighed, and tapped his wand again. “Conference, Hermione Granger, Albus Dumbledore, Sirius Black.”

It took a few moments before the two men were able to answer. “What’s up, pup?” Came the gravelly tones of his godfather.

“Harry, are you all right?” Was Dumbledore’s response. “I’m at the Ministry at the moment, and there’s an uproar. According to this, you’ve just conjured a Patronus charm.”

“Dementors, sir.” Harry replied. “A pair of them attacked me and Dudley. We’re both okay.”

“This is troubling.” Dumbledore said. “Harry, I believe this is the next step in the Ministry’s smear campaign. You must head home as soon as possible and get behind the blood wards. Do no more magic. The Ministry will no doubt have a Misuse letter on the way to you right now. Do you need assistance?”

“I’ll be okay. I’ll get the blimp home. Hang on... someone’s coming. I’ll speak to you later.”

From around the corner came one of Harry’s neighbours, Mrs. Figg...

“So, I went back to Durzkaban, where I received the Ministry’s letters informing me that I’d been expelled, even though such an action was against Article Seven of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of

Underage Sorcery. That's why it's called 'Reasonable'. I received several more letters that night, and went up to bed. I portkeyed across to Hermione's private room at Grimmauld, which was a bit of a hovel."

"Hey!" The portrait of Sirius spoke up. "I spent a lot of time cleaning up there."

Harry turned round, one eyebrow raised. "Sirius, the whole house was a shit-hole. There's an old saying: 'you can polish a turd, but it's still a turd'. That certainly applied to Grimmauld Place. While there, I spoke to Sirius and Remus, explaining the situation. Albus sent me a book, containing the basic laws of the Wizengamot, since he knew that Fudge would try anything he could to discredit me.

"I got moved to Grimmauld Place four days later, courtesy of a long broom flight through freezing cold rain clouds. Once I got there, I got another back-ache from Ron's smother, before being hustled out of the room, so the 'adults' could talk about the war.

"Sirius came up to see me later that evening, and we had a conference, where I was basically told everything that was going on. Recruitment, battle-plans, everything. It was funny watching the Weasley twins try and listen in on meetings, while I got personal briefings every day."

Both Harry and Hermione glanced over, seeing the two redheaded, and now red-faced, twins fuming silently. With a casual wand-flick, Hermione unsilenced the Weasleys.

"Do not do that again!" Ron snapped angrily. "How dare you?"

Hermione just stared at Ron for a moment. "You have something you wish to say?"

"This is all such bullshit!" Ron spat. "This whole thing is a bunch of lies! You didn't know any more than me!"

Hermione sniggered. "Ron, a passing bluebottle knows more than you. You believed what we wanted you to believe."

Molly suddenly stood up. "Are you telling me that Sirius told you all about the Order's plans?"

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley. He did. Membership, recruitment. I knew where you were going and when. In two cases, me and Hermione helped you out behind the scenes. You forget; we still had time-turners. We knew about your missions and occasionally did some of our own."

Molly started shrieking in such a high-pitch, Remus winced. Hermione glanced over at the communication mirror. "What's she saying?"

With a grimace, Remus shook his head. "I don't think I can repeat it. There's ladies and children present. Suffice to say, she'd be throwing some pretty nasty curses at Sirius and Dumbledore right now."

"Silence!" Dumbledore's voice bellowed in the Great Hall, instantly being obeyed. The portrait grinned at Harry. "I love doing that!"

Harry chuckled, as he thrust his pinky finger into his ear. "Perhaps... but we're kinda deaf now."

Dumbledore's portrait just shrugged. "That's fine. Long as I get my jollies, I don't mind."

"You really are a twisted, evil old man, aren't you?" Harry asked, smirking at his mentor, who responded in a mature and responsible fashion, by sticking out his tongue and blowing a raspberry.

"Moving on..." Harry said, straightening up and going back to the crowd. "Because of our summer training, seeing the Professors on an almost daily basis, there came a rather intense conversation. Minerva and Dumbledore were talking about who to make the Prefect for the fifth year."

"I'm still annoyed you refused the position." McGonagall said brusquely, from her seat near the back of the Hall. "You would have made a marvellous prefect."

Ron's red face instantly transformed to an unhealthy purple, but the crowd was saved another blast of Weasley temper, thanks to Arthur's quick spell work as he once again silenced his son.

"I was offered the Prefect position." Harry said. "I turned it down. I wasn't really that interested in being an even more public figure. Plus, if Albus had made me Prefect, then it would have caused problems with the Ministry. They were looking to discredit me and Albus, and being a prefect would have made them even more irate."

"So, it was decided that Harry was given a badge, but he wasn't the named Prefect." Hermione continued the tale. "Most of the time, he accompanied me when I was doing my rounds, under his invisibility cloak. There were a number of times when certain Slytherin students felt the need to attack the... what was it he called me?"

"'Uppity Mudblood whore'." Harry supplied helpfully.

"Thank you, dear." Hermione said mockingly. "Yes, when Malfoy and three of his goons popped out of nowhere and tried to attack me. Of course, they didn't even get the first syllable of their curse out before we'd rendered them unconscious and memory charmed them." She snorted. "Prats."

"More to the point, both Albus and Minerva told us that Molly Weasley had been heavily hinting that Ron was ready for the duties and responsibilities of being a Prefect. At the end of each and every Order meeting, she'd mention how wonderful it would be, and how magnificently Ron would perform his duties."

Several people in the crowd snorted as they remembered Ron's performance.

"Quite." Harry said, nodding gently to the crowd. "He was useless, but that doesn't matter. I had a badge, and I was gonna do the damned job anyway."

"I still wish you'd been the public prefect." Dumbledore sighed from his portrait. "There'd have been so much fewer incidents."

Harry just shrugged. "I did enough. I made rounds with Hermione, I stopped fights, I sent people back to bed. I nearly snapped Malfoy's neck when he wasn't looking when he had that third year Hufflepuff cornered near the dungeons. Poor kid... he never deserved to be told he'd been selected to 'service' Malfoy."

Clearing his throat, Harry continued. "Anyone who was here during the 1995-96 school year will remember that was the year we had Delores Jane Umbridge here, first as our Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, and then as the first ever High Inquisitor. When we heard her during the Sorting Feast, both me and Hermione were pretty much fuming that the Ministry had decided to put a flunky into our school to control us." Harry grinned.

"Alas," Hermione said, sounding remarkably similar to a certain former-Headmaster, "things did not turn out the way we anticipated. As we were sitting down in the Great Hall, before the first years were brought in, a piece of parchment flew over to Harry..."

Flashback: The Great Hall, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Friday, 1st September, 1995

Sitting down at the Gryffindor table, Harry quickly reached down, giving Hermione's hand a quick squeeze, while Ron and Ginny took their places on the other side of the table.

"I've seen her before." Harry whispered, pointing to the squat little woman who was sitting next to Professor McGonagall. "She was there during my Wizengamot trial. She basically made out that I was lying about the Dementors."

Hermione looked up, spotting the vile little woman sneering around the room. "I'm sure she's gonna be trouble."

Harry sighed. "Have we ever had a plain and simple year here, Hermione? You know, where the most worrying thing we have to deal with is exams, or love lives?" She shook her head, smiling slightly.

"No... didn't think so. And now, we have a civil war brewing, with people interfering left, right and bloody centre."

"It could be worse, Harry." Hermione said primly.

"Oh?"

"Yes... we could be without each other." This sentence was spoken in a whisper. "I know I couldn't survive without you by my side." She grinned wickedly. "Or on top of me, or underneath."

"Wench." Harry smirked back. "I know that I can't live without you, Hermione."

The sound of a clearing throat brought the two young lovers' attention back to Ron and Ginny, who were eyeing the pair suspiciously. "What're you talking about?" Ron asked.

"Umbridge." Harry replied, gesturing vaguely at the Head Table. "She's the squat little creature in pink next to McGonagall. She's Ministry, and she's trouble."

Both Ron and Ginny craned their necks, looking up.

"Not an ounce of bloody subtlety." Harry whispered to Hermione, who nodded imperceptibly.

Before he could say anything else, a small parchment bird flitted over the table, landing neatly in Harry's outstretched hand. With a slight frown, Harry opened the piece of parchment, reading the note quickly.

Mr. Potter,

I require your presence in my office this evening, at the completion of the Sorting Feast. My office is on the third floor, at the rear of the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom. This will be a private meeting, so do not inform anybody about it. I will know if you do.

Professor Delores Umbridge

He glanced across at Hermione, and gulped. "This could be a problem..."



She nodded. "Yes... I looked her up, using some of Professor Dumbledore's contacts, just after your hearing. She's a firm proponent of the pureblood agenda, and she detests anything that's not completely human. She'd have hated Remus, and will loathe Hagrid with a fiery passion. She's trouble, Harry. I think we need to notify the others, and get them to listen in to the meeting."

"Will you come with?" Harry asked softly. "Under your cloak? If the shit hits the fan, there's no-one I'd rather have at my back."

She smiled warmly at him. "Of course I will. Now... how to tell the others about the meeting..."

After sending a flying note up to the Headmaster, who nodded and pulled out his pocket watch, the two teens carried on with their dinner. They listened to the announcements, sharing horrified looks as Umbridge took the stage, announcing that the Ministry was basically trying to take over the running of Hogwarts.

Ron had started snoring at one point, prompting Harry to kick him in the shin under the table, never letting his attention waver from the toad. He snorted as he woke up, only to have Neville's hand clamp over his mouth. Judging by the reaction from Harry and Hermione, it was important that they listen to this speech.

Hermione and Ron left the Great Hall, leading the first years up to Gryffindor tower. At least, in theory, it was. Hermione quickly ducked behind a statue, flipping her invisibility cloak over herself, before racing to the third floor. She saw Harry slowly walking along the corridor, almost as though walking the Green Mile.

She stepped up behind him, tapping his shoulder once to let him know that she was there. He straightened up slightly, before walking a little quicker. He opened the door to the defence classroom, climbing the steps to the office before taking a deep breath, and knocking on the door.

"Come in." The sickly sweet voice called out, making Harry shiver. He opened the door widely, making no attempt to step inside the office.

"You asked to see me, Madam Umbridge?" He said politely.

"Ah, yes. Please, come in, Mr. Potter." She smiled an ugly smile, forcing Harry's teeth to grit automatically.

"Thank you, Madam." He stepped inside the office, feeling Hermione slip past under the cloak, and shut the door.

As soon as the door catch clicked, Umbridge's wand was in hand, flicking at the door. Harry recognised the movements as a series of privacy wards, standard for all government employees. With a raised eyebrow, Harry sat down on the chair in front of her desk.

After the wards were finished, Umbridge settled herself into her own chair. "Now, Mr. Potter... I'm sure you're wondering why I wanted to have a little chat with you."

Harry nodded slowly. "I am understandably curious, ma'am." He replied diplomatically.

"Yes..." She smiled sweetly at him. "First, I would like to ask you some questions, Mr. Potter. One of the reasons I was assigned to Hogwarts is because you are a known trouble-maker to the Ministry of Magic. What do you have to say about that?"

"I'm not really sure what I can say about that, Madam." Harry replied.

Umbridge nodded slowly. "I would like your opinion, please, about the current Minister, and the Ministry as a whole."

"Ma'am?"

"Tell me what you think about the Ministry." She repeated. "And do not lie, or try and be diplomatic. I wish to hear the complete, unvarnished truth."

Shrugging, knowing that there was an excellent chance this would drop him in the shit, he answered. "I think that Fudge is a wanker with delusions of adequacy. He's a piss-poor peace-time Minister, and now that we're in a state of war, which he refuses to declare, he's going to get a lot of good people killed."

"I see." Umbridge said, in a controlled voice. "And you still claim that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has been returned to corporeal form?"

"Yes, ma'am. I do. I was there. He killed my fellow contender, and I fought him. He is back."

"I see." She repeated. "And you are aware that the Ministry of Magic has decreed that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has not returned, and that you are simply stirring up trouble?"

"I am aware of that, yes." Harry replied. "However, I am not an ostrich. I will not bury my head in the sand and hope everything turns out for the best. I will stand, and I will fight... with, or without, the Ministry."

"And what of the rest of the Ministry's personnel?"

Harry sighed. "From my observations, there are two groups of people at the Ministry, the poor, hard-working sort, and the incompetent fuckwits who run around, bugging things up to maintain their own power, prestige and wealth. I think the second category should be hanged at dawn."

"You are wrong, Mr. Potter." Umbridge said firmly. "There is a third category. The spies, the agents... the idealists."

"Ma'am?"

Umbridge looked at him. "Would you be so kind as to ask Miss Granger to remove her invisibility cloak, please?" Her voice was different. No longer grating, it was smooth, and sensual. Harry's wand appeared in his hand, and he could almost feel Hermione's do the same. They'd both had experience with impostors in their time.

"I'm not sure what you mean, ma'am?" Harry said cautiously.

Umbridge looked down at her desk, where a piece of parchment rested. After a moment of intense scrutiny, Umbridge pointed to an open area of her office. "A 'Hermione Jane Granger' is stood there, Mr. Potter. Since I cannot see her, I assume she is under a cloak or disillusionment charm. I would like to speak to her, too."

After a moment of staring, Harry said, "Hermione?"

The air rippled as Hermione pulled off her invisibility cloak. "Won't you sit down, Miss Granger?" Umbridge asked. After Hermione had sat down, Umbridge leaned back in her chair.

"How did you know I was there, Professor?" Hermione asked, indiscreetly keeping her wand in hand.

"I have access to a rather... unique map, Mr. Potter." She said, holding up the piece of parchment. "This piece of parchment shows-"

"How dare you go through my things?" Harry roared.

Umbridge raised an eyebrow. "You have a copy of the Marauders' Map? Curious... I was under the impression that the prototype was destroyed."

"Never mind that now, Harry." Hermione said firmly, before turning to Umbridge. "Madam Umbridge, why have you requested this meeting?"

"Ah, straight to the point." Umbridge said happily. "I like that. If I were to put it in basic terms, Miss Granger, I wished to meet both Mr. Potter and yourself upon my arrival here."

"Oh?" Harry asked.

"Yes. According to Minister Fudge, you two are criminals, protected by Dumbledore, who are working with him to overthrow the Ministry, and set yourselves in charge of the whole of Magical Britain. Fudge believes you two should be in Azkaban. As far as I'm concerned, that

makes you two interesting people, and I like to meet interesting people.”

Harry and Hermione exchanged a small questioning look, before returning their attention to Umbridge. “I’m not certain we understand, Professor.” Hermione admitted.

“Allow me a few moments of your time, then, to tell a tale. In 1973, a young, idealistic half-blood witch began attending Hogwarts. She was Sorted into Hufflepuff house, and kept a very low profile, as most Hufflepuffs do. At the end of her third year, she witnessed a werewolf prowling the grounds, and read up about them. She learned of the rampant bigotry, cronyism, prejudice and racism that was rampant in the magical world, and made a decision to go into politics upon her graduation.

“On August 1st, 1980, after her graduation, she started working at the Ministry of Magic, as an intern in the Department of International Magical Co-operation. It was quickly made clear to her that as a half-blood witch, she was expected to perform duties ‘above and beyond’ for her pureblood Head of Department. Director Bagshot made it clear that this young witch would progress no further in her career unless he gave into her demands.

“What the Director was unaware of was that this witch was rather good with both potions and charms. She gave him a potion that, when activated with a charm, would cause a certain part of him to fail. Her virtue safe, she began her crusade.

“On October 24th, 1981, the witch’s parents were killed by He-Who-Everyone-Is-Too-Scared-To-Call-By-His-Shite-Anagram, personally. A week later, the bastard had been disembodied. The crusade altered into a quest for revenge. The young witch made a name for herself as a stern believer in pureblood superiority, so she could move in the ‘right’ circles.”

“But... we’ve heard about you.” Harry said slowly. “You’re one of the bigots of the Ministry. You hate half-breeds and non-purebloods.”

“No, I don’t.” Umbridge said. “I never have. I’ve only met one werewolf in my life, and he was a lovely chap. Bit quiet and bookish, but a good man. Hagrid, on the other hand, scares me.”

“What?” Hermione snapped.

“What’s wrong with Hagrid?” Harry asked at the same time.

Umbridge flinched slightly. “It’s a silly reason.”

“Tell me.” Harry demanded.

“His height.” She admitted quietly. “I can’t stand very tall men. They’re... creepy.”

After exchanging an incredulous look with Harry, Hermione asked, “So... you knew Remus Lupin while he was at school? And you have a copy of the Marauders’ Map.”

Umbridge flicked her wand at the parchment. “Mischief Managed.” The parchment cleared.

Deciding to take a chance, Harry lifted his watch to his mouth. “Remus, can you confirm this?” To his horror, it wasn’t Moony that answered the call, but the voice of his best friend.

“Did you have a nickname, back when you were at Hogwarts?”

Umbridge frowned. “Sirius Black?” She looked intently at Harry. “Would you care to explain why you are in contact with an alleged mass-murderer?”

“He’s my godfather.” Harry replied.

“I know that.”

“And he’s innocent.”

"I didn't know that." She pondered for a moment. "But, I believe that. It seemed damned odd at the time that James' brother would just sell him out. If Sirius wasn't the Secret-Keeper, who was?"

"Pettigrew." Sirius' voice hissed over the communicator. "Little rat-bastard betrayed James and Lily, then set me up."

"Tubs?" Umbridge exclaimed incredulously. "Tubs set you up? Little shite... how? He was absolutely no match for any of you. Silly bugger barely knew which end of his wand was which."

Harry decided to take a chance. "Pettigrew was hiding here at Hogwarts, as a pet rat of the Weasley family. When Sirius broke out of Azkaban, he was after the rat, not me."

"And you haven't answered my question." Sirius said. "What was your nickname at Hogwarts?"

Umbridge sighed. "You're gonna make me say it, aren't you?"

"Yes." Sirius and Remus said together.

"Marauders." Umbridge scoffed. "Fine... I believe James insisted on calling me 'ickle Dee-Dee."

"That's her, Harry." Sirius said, a grin in his words. "'Ickle Dee-Dee was two years behind us."

"And do I need to remind you about the 21st of March, 1978, Sirius, or are you going to play nice?"

A roar of laughter came over the watch, which Harry and Hermione quickly identified as Remus. "I'll be good." Sirius' petulant reply came.

"Harry." Dumbledore's voice sounded over the communicator. "I'm with Minerva and Severus in my office. Perhaps this conversation could be continued here?"

Umbridge nodded, picking up the map. "I solemnly swear I am up to no good." She intoned.

Unlike Harry's copy of the Marauders' Map, the writing on this version was different, as it activated.

Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs,  
With special guests Miss Tiger-Lily and the Batman  
Purveyors of Aids to Magical Mischief-Makers are proud to present  
THE MARAUDERS' MAP  
Version 2.0

"I remember Professor Snape talking about this." Harry said, looking down at the map fondly. "How did you get it, Professor?"

"Lily." Umbridge said simply. "On her graduation day, she came and gave this to me. She said that she needed a worthy successor to pass it on to. I was going to pass it on when I graduated, but something told me to keep hold of it... that I'd need it in the future."

Umbridge quickly tapped her wand against her throat, restoring her voice to the bloody irritating, sugary-sweet voice. "Shall we go?"

After a stealthy dash through the falls to the second floor, the group ascended the stairs into the Headmaster's Office.

As Harry opened the door, he saw Professor Dumbledore behind his desk, looking like a relaxed grandfather, waiting to pass on some nugget of wisdom. Snape and McGonagall were stood on either side of Dumbledore, their arms crossed and faces blank. When Harry stepped into the office, he saw one of the hand-held communication mirrors Sirius had passed out, enlarged to the size of a television, hanging on the wall. In it, Sirius and Remus could be seen, looking intently at them. As soon as Sirius clapped eyes on Umbridge, he started.

"Harry, that's not her!" He roared.

"Wait!" Umbridge said, as five wands locked onto her. "Miss Granger, please take my wand."



Hermione's hand shot out, grabbing Umbridge's wand from her hand, before taking a step back.

"Now, I'm going to pull up my right sleeve." Umbridge did so, revealing a gold gauntlet around her forearm. "This is why I look like I do. Mr. Potter, if you look near my wrist, there is a small indentation. Please place the tip of your wand in there"

Harry looked at Dumbledore, who nodded slowly. As he pressed his wand, Umbridge intoned, "I solemnly swear I am not ugly." The bottom of the gauntlet opened with a 'crack', allowing Umbridge to pull it off. The instant it left her arm, her form shifted, revealing a woman of equal height, but all other features were different.

She was far thinner, having a slim, athletic figure. Her hair was long, reaching the middle of her back, jet-black, with hints of blonde streaked through. Her face was the biggest surprise, though. She was... cute. Had Harry been older, and not completely head over heels for Hermione, he'd have been interested.

"Curious..." Snape said, as he stepped round the desk and took the gauntlet. His wand flicked as he ran a few diagnostic scans.

"That's her, Harry." Remus said slowly. "At least, that's what the girl we remember would look like fifteen years later."

Snape looked up at Dumbledore. "A powerful glamour and signature suppression bracelet, Albus. Expertly done, too." He glanced at Umbridge. "I do remember just how good you were with charms."

"Why, though, Dee-Dee?" Sirius asked. "Why would you voluntarily make yourself look like... that?"

Umbridge gestured at the chairs in front of Dumbledore's desk. "Do you mind if I sit, Headmaster?" Her voice had dropped back into the sensuous version.

Dumbledore gestured to the chairs, flicking his wand to make sure everyone could be seated. "In your own time, Delores."

She held up her hand. "I'd rather be called 'Dee', if you don't mind." Umbridge said.

"'Dee'?" Hermione asked as she settled next to Harry.

"If you had a name like 'Delores', you'd want something else, too." The newly-christened 'Dee' replied. "I don't know what my mother was thinking..." She shook her head, before looking at Sirius. "You asked why I'd do my best to be unattractive. Were you listening in to the whole conversation?"

"We were." Sirius confirmed.

"Director Bagshot believed that I would be honoured to 'service' him. I disagreed. After Voldy's fall in '81, I cast the glamour over myself. After all, who'd want to shag that? So, it's a form of protection."

"Understandable." Remus said neutrally. "So, what exactly is your purpose at Hogwarts, Dee? From what I've heard about you, you're a staunch supporter of pureblood human rights."

Dee just shrugged. "I don't really give a hoot about blood lines, Moony. Werewolves don't bother me. Centaurs and Merfolk are fine."

Remus raised an eyebrow. "But, you sponsored the anti-werewolf bill."

Umbridge nodded slowly. "I did sponsor a werewolf bill, true. But, the bill I proposed got perverted. I believe that all werewolves should be registered. I believe that they should be taken to a secure facility on the night of the full moon, and force-fed Wolfsbane potion. I believe they should be treated for their injuries in the morning, before they head off back to whatever it is they were doing."

"Could you elaborate, Madam Umbridge?" Dumbledore asked.

Dee nodded. "The original Werewolf Protection Act, as I called it, was designed to protect everybody, not just the werewolves. In the original bill, on the night of a full moon, all werewolves head to safe-

houses, where they are given a flagon of Wolfsbane potion, allowed to get undressed in private, and spend the evening running round a nature preserve. They're watched over by magical being specialists. In the mornings, they're taken to a hospital facility, to be treated for any problems."

"And the registration?" Remus asked quietly.

"People like Fenrir Greyback make that necessary." Dee said firmly. "That... creature, deliberately attacks children. If there's a register, then when each werewolf makes their way to the safe-house, they're ticked off. If anyone doesn't show up, they can be collected and medicated."

Remus pondered for a moment. "So, the original bill was designed to keep us out of harm's way, keep us with our minds, and then heal us in the morning?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, people like Fudge and Lucius Malfoy corrupted the bill. I managed to sneak in a few clauses, but not enough to override the damage they did."

"While this is certainly interesting," McGonagall said after a moment, "it's rather late this evening."

"Hmm?" Umbridge looked up. "Oh, yes, of course. Well, to sum up my purpose for being here, it's two-fold, only one of which the Ministry knows about. Officially, I am here to make certain that Headmaster Dumbledore isn't trying to train the students to form an army against the Ministry. Fudge believes that you're going to attempt to overthrow him, and are using the excuse of a resurrected Voldemort as your sales pitch."

In another time and another life, Harry would have started raising up a storm, but in this time and this life, he sat patiently, waiting for Dee to continue.

"Now, unofficially, I'm here to find out just what the bloody hell is going on. In the summer of 1994, Bertha Jorkins disappeared from her job at the Department of Magical Games and Sports, and no-one

batted an eyelid. Then, there was the Death Eater attack on the World Cup. I personally have my suspicions about who that was, but I can't prove it.

"Then, at the end of the Tri-Wizard tournament, a pair of contenders go missing, and when they return almost an hour later, one of them is dead, and the other is injured. Bartemius Crouch Junior is suddenly at Hogwarts, and Kissed instantly. Why? That was never answered. Then, I hear of orders to start a smear campaign against the Tri-Wizard champion, which Percy Weasley ran. A proclamation of Voldemort's return's made, and all of a sudden, Albus Dumbledore is removed from virtually all his positions, with no explanation given... and no-one's saying a damned thing. And then there's more damning evidence.

"Cornelius Fudge orders a freeze on Auror recruitment and training, and cuts the funding for that department by nearly sixty percent. There's barely enough Aurors at the moment for routine patrolling, and he orders budget cuts! A series of questioning begins at the Ministry, demanding to know where people's loyalty lies. And all the while, Lucius Malfoy, a man who was never fully cleared of Death Eater activity, begins mincing round the Ministry like he owns the damned place. The most distressing part is the fact that a confidential order came through, ordering Dementors to the residence of Harry Potter, and no-one knows where it came from, or why." She sighed, rant over. "I want to know what's going on. When the position became available here at Hogwarts, I applied."

Dumbledore had been listening carefully to her whole speech. "I'm sure you can understand my scepticism, Madam, when I recall some of your... history."

Umbridge looked at Hermione. "May I have my wand?"

Gingerly, Hermione held out Umbridge's wand.

"Thank you." Umbridge said. "I, Delores Jane Umbridge, hereby solemnly swear on my magic and my life that I am here to learn the truth of the situation regarding the Dark Wizard who calls himself 'Lord Voldemort', and to rally support and training for any and all

organisations who wish to combat him. I also swear that my time here will be spent searching out and identifying all those who work for and/or with the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters, so that action may be taken against them. I further swear that everything I have stated and will state in this conversation is the truth, and that nothing shall be revealed without permission. So I swear, so mote it be.”

Her wand flashed for a moment, and, as she didn’t drop dead, it became instantly obvious that she wasn’t lying.

The group relaxed visibly. “What is your official assignment, Dee?” Snape asked.

“Officially, I am to stop all defence spell-casting immediately. All students are to learn theoretical knowledge only, regardless of their year-level. This is to make sure that none of the current students are going to be a challenge to the Ministry.” Umbridge recounted unhappily. “I’m also going to be given new powers in a few weeks, that of ‘High Inquisitor’. This means that I can monitor all the fireplaces for unauthorised Floo conversations, screen all mail, and basically begin the preparation for the taking over of the school.”

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. “Does Cornelius really believe that I’ll allow this?”

Umbridge looked nervous. “Fudge already has plans for you. After Easter, you are to be... removed. Either arrested and charged as a criminal, if possible, or forcibly retired because of simple incompetence. The Board of Governors, conveniently headed by Lucius Malfoy, will step in, and declare me as the Headmistress, thus cementing the Ministry’s control over this school.”

“An... ambitious plan.” Dumbledore said casually.

“I don’t want this.” Umbridge moaned, slumping in her chair. “I hate paperwork at the best of times, and I know I’m neither wise enough or powerful enough to run a school. Never mind the fact that I really don’t want to. Unfortunately, to maintain my cover, I may have to.”

Harry cleared his throat. “Ma’am, what about your unofficial mission?”

“Ah,” Umbridge brightened instantly, “I have the names of several people who were confirmed Death Eaters during the last war, and they now have children. The Malfoys, the Notts, the Parkinsons... all manner of Dark families. All of them, conveniently, managed to avoid prosecution by being under the Imperius curse last time... after a ‘campaign contribution’ to Fudge. They are my targets while I’m here. I want them in Azkaban.”

Hermione thought for a moment. “Ma’am, you said that you’re going to be made an Inquisitor. Why not get them to become some kind of... of squad. If you make it clear you’re looking for a certain type of student, one who supports Voldemort, they’ll be easy to attract.”

Dumbledore nodded. “An excellent idea, Hermione... yes, an Inquisitorial Squad, comprised of Voldemort supporters. They’ll be swaggering about the school, making them very easy to spot.”

“Malfoy already suggested it.” Umbridge admitted. “He recommended that his son be put in charge of it.” She looked at Harry. “One of the reasons I sought you out, Mr. Potter, is that you are probably the most anti-Voldemort student in this school. I... I need your help.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I wish to make you an example, to solidify my position here.” At Harry’s raised eyebrow, she continued. “If you were to be placed in detention, with me, at lot, it will help maintain my ‘evil’ persona. Cornelius has authorised the use of a blood quill for writing lines.”

“What?” Seven voices shouted in unison. Dumbledore stood up. “I cannot allow you to use a blood quill, Delores.”

“And I have no intention of using one.” Umbridge said calmly, prompting Dumbledore to reseal himself, looking at her warily. “There’s a reason such things are illegal, one of my pieces of legislature that I’m actually proud of. The only people who still use blood quills are the Goblins, since they believe in Blood magic, and certain departments of the Ministry, mainly those who deal with binding contracts. However, if Mr. Potter was to spend time in

detention, perhaps catching up on any homework he may have, or even just chatting with me, and I place a glamour on his hand, it will look like 'the evil hag Umbridge' is torturing the boy." She looked at Snape. "Much like you, Severus."

He nodded slowly. "Yes... I can understand the deception. I will not allow you to harm any of my students though, Dee, no matter how much some of the little bastards may deserve it."

"I wouldn't!" Umbridge protested. "I'm a Hufflepuff, Sev, I won't harm anyone. That's why I want to use Harry. He's known as a centre of attention. If I'm 'torturing' him, and no-one says a word about it, the normal students will make damned sure not to cross me, and those who lean towards Voldemort will flock to his banner."

McGonagall looked at Umbridge carefully. "It has to be Harry's decision."

Harry looked at Umbridge for a moment. "Allow me to clarify; you wish to use me as an example of your 'evilness', putting me in lots of detentions. During these detentions, I'll be officially writing lines with a blood quill, but in actuality, I'll be catching up on my homework, and other things."

"Pretty much." Umbridge said. "I'd like to chat with you. Maybe tell you a few stories about your parents. Also, I'm hoping you can fill me in on what else is happening round here. There's far too many unanswered questions about some of the students."

Harry glanced at Hermione, who nodded slowly, giving her tacit approval. "I suppose... I'm in, Professor."

"Good." Umbridge said cheerfully. "Now, with regards to actual Defence training, I'm hoping that you'll be able to do some, and pass it along to the people who need it. From the scuttlebutt, you're at least NEWT-level in your DADA course, possibly even further." She looked at Dumbledore. "Although, considering Harry's status as the 'Boy-Who-Lived', I'd have thought you would be training him to do more."

“We have.” The other five adults commented, aware that Umbridge’s oath wouldn’t allow her to reveal the contents of this conversation. McGonagall continued. “Both Harry and Hermione have been performing advanced training since the end of their first year. They’re both at least NEWT-level in all subjects, not to mention several other topics of study.”

“Excellent.” Umbridge nodded approvingly. “I actually hold a Mastery in Defence Against the Dark Arts, so maybe I can help with some of that. Also, I think there’s one thing I can teach you that no-one else here can; the political in-fighting at the Ministry. I have notes about almost everyone.”

Dumbledore leaned forward. “That would be a very useful subject...” He said cagily. “Would you be willing to share those detentions with Miss Granger?”

“Of course.” Umbridge said. “Also, since Harry’s watch appears to be a communications device of some kind, you’d be able to listen in and monitor the ‘detentions’.” Hermione nodded. “There is one other thing. I’ve been ordered to make Potter’s life hell while he’s here. Cornelius ordered a life-time Quidditch ban for you, to be implemented at my request.”

McGonagall started to speak, only to be cut-off by Harry’s raised hand. “Why?”

“Because you enjoy it.” Umbridge replied. “Your Quidditch skills are famous, and your love of the game-”

“Is a fallacy.” Harry interrupted. “I’m actually not that big of a fan of Quidditch. Flying is what I love. I’ll play Quidditch, but it’s not my life. I’m not Ron Weasley.”

“So... you don’t mind being removed from the Quidditch team?” Umbridge asked.

“Nah.” Harry said casually. “Long as I still fly, I’m okay.”



"I also have instructions to confiscate your broomstick." Umbridge reached into her pocket, pulling out a six-inch toy broom. "Professor McGonagall, could you transfigure this into an appropriate replica of Mr. Potter's Firebolt? That way, I can confiscate the fake, rather than the original."

McGonagall's wand flashed for a moment, transfiguring the broom. "It won't fly, though." She warned.

"Considering I'm going to chain it to my office wall to taunt Harry, that doesn't really matter." Umbridge replied, shrinking the broom down and putting it back in her pocket.

"Harry," Hermione spoke up. "I've just had a thought. Now, you won't have to get up at four in the morning to chase golf balls about."

Grinning, Harry nodded. "A lie-in... what a foreign concept." He sighed happily. "More snuggling time."

"So, to conclude." Umbridge said, conveniently ignoring the 'snuggling' comment. "Mr. Potter, you will be banned from Quidditch, with your consent, of course, and I shall confiscate your 'broom'. You will spend time in detention with me. In your first defence class, make certain you are... suitably disruptive. I'll give points for extra creativity, by the way. Miss Granger, you shall also be spending time in detention. I'm sure you'll think of a reason. During those 'detentions', you'll be 'tortured', so I can come across as suitably evil, while I check out the rest of the students."

"Sounds like a plan." Snape said. "Of course, I shall be as... annoying as normal, taking points left, right and centre, and passing them to Minerva at the end of each day."

"Yes, I was wondering about that." Umbridge said. "May I do the same, Professor?"

"Of course." McGonagall said amiably. "And we're colleagues now, Dee. I'm sure you could call me by my first name."

“Oh... Er... possibly.” Umbridge said, blushing lightly. “Be a bit weird, though.”

“Madam Umbridge,” Hermione said pompously, “we’re witches and wizards. ‘Weird’ is part of the job.”

Harry glanced over at Ron, who was fuming nicely. “I know what you’re all thinking; utter bullshit. Umbridge was evil, twisted and malicious.” Above his heads, the floating words again flashed. “Dee was, frankly, top. She had an evil sense of humour, and a strong sense of justice. Almost all her detentions were just chats. Apart from a couple of people, who committed pranks that could have really hurt someone. They got both barrels.”

Hermione continued. “We chatted, and learned a lot about the Ministry during those detentions. We also took advantage of having a little alone time, whenever Dee was out and about doing other things.”

Smirking, Harry said, “I remember that time when you were... performing, and she came in and told you off. Not for doing it, but for bending over the desk.”

Hermione smirked herself. “Ah, yes. ‘Miss Granger! Do not do that! You’ll hurt your back and your neck. It’s far better to climb under the desk, dear, instead of leaning over it.’” She chuckled. “She’s a character, isn’t she?”

“Wait a minute.” Rita Skeeter stood up again. “We heard that she was sending people to camps, just after Dumbledore died.”

“Don’t be so impatient, Skeeter.” Hermione said dismissively. “We’ll get to that. All in proper time.” She looked down at Skeeter, who sank meekly back into her chair, before glancing round the hall. “So, we were at school, working hard on our studies, which was ironic, considering that the pair of us could have taken the OWLs about midway through our third year, patrolling the castle for the little Death Nibblers and smacking them down at the right time.”

“Now, a curious thing that people began to notice was that Dumbledore was pretty much ignoring me in public. And it’s true; he was. The reason for that is because we knew that Voldemort’s spies in Hogwarts, which was pretty much the whole of Slytherin, were watching both him and me, waiting to see if anything interesting was happening, so that they could report it.

“So, we didn’t do a great deal in public. I didn’t go to his office to talk to him, and he didn’t come and see me. However, we still had our communicators, and could speak whenever we needed to. I saw a good number of the Professors, since both Hermione and myself were still turning time to attend our classes.

“And then, the ban...”

Flashback: The Quidditch Pitch, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Saturday, 30th September, 1995

“...perhaps,” said Malfoy, leering as he backed away, “you can’t remember what your mother’s house stank like, Potter, and Weasleys’ pigsty reminds you of it-”

It was at this point that Harry launched himself forward. The slurs about the Weasleys were meaningless to him. He tolerated them, but he didn’t particularly enjoy spending a great deal of time with them. Molly’s constant smothering presence, Ron’s jealousy, Ginny’s pathetic infatuation, Fred and George’s childish pranks... only Arthur was tolerable, simply because the man was so tolerant himself.

But Malfoy didn’t have the right to say anything about Lily Potter. Plus, it was a chance to earn himself the Quidditch ban for the ‘evil’ Umbridge, without causing himself any problems with his team-mates. And, the icing on the cake, he’d get to pummel Malfoy. Really, what more could he ask for?

Malfoy’s nose made a very enjoyable crunch underneath Harry’s fist, but the Gryffindor was only getting warmed up. He half-remembered

a quote from a film he'd seen; 'there are 215 bones in the human body... that's one!' 214 to go! He thought gleefully, as he lashed out against Malfoy's ribs, hoping to pop a couple of those while he was at it.

"What are you doing?" Madam Hooch half-shouted, half-screech, her wand and whistle in hand...

Harry watched George leave McGonagall's office, closing the door behind him. "Well played, Harry." Minerva said, a distinctly evil smirk on her face. "Does that work for you, Dee?"

Umbridge tapped her wand to her throat, removing the glamour on her voice. "Oh, yes." She purred. "Although, I am a little disappointed in you, Harry." She said.

"What? Why?" Harry asked.

"You only managed to break Malfoy's nose. I was hoping you could snap his neck or something equally vicious. Little mincer really gets on my nerves. Seriously, would a minor fatality have been too much to ask for?"

Harry just chuckled. "Unfortunately, Professors, killing Draco would have brought Luscious down on us, and that's attention I could happily do without. Anything that Lucy does, Voldy knows. I'd prefer to keep him out of it."

Umbridge sighed unhappily. "True, I'm afraid. And don't call him 'Luscious'. That brings far too many unpleasant thoughts to mind." She let out another sigh. "What I'd give to see that man in Azkaban, Dementors guarding him day and night. Nothing but the best for the 'paragon of virtue' that is Lucius Malfoy."

"Any more news on that, by the way?" Harry asked, looking between Umbridge and McGonagall.

"No." Umbridge sighed again. "I've tried to make hints to the Minister about removing the Dementors, but the silly wanker thinks that it's entirely safe. Where's a good assassin when you need one?"

"Delores Umbridge!" McGonagall snapped. "I know that you didn't just say that in an unsecured room!"

Umbridge winced slightly. "Right... Anyway, I'd better go and give the other Weasley his ban."

"Why?" McGonagall asked. "I realise that the Weasleys are not exactly the paragon of virtues that they portray themselves as, but why ban Fred too?"

"That would be because of the 'prank' the two of them played." Umbridge scowled. "The two little shits tried to feed one of the Slytherin first years a half-pint of Bubotuber pus. She'd have died, instantly."

Both McGonagall and Harry were speechless. McGonagall found her voice first. "What?"

"One of the Slytherins gave them a dirty look, so they dragged her out of the Great Hall, grabbed her nose and put the container right under. Poor little kid damned near soiled herself."

"But..."

"They said, when I caught up to them, that they were only teasing." Umbridge said. "To my mind, that is not a prank. That's an entirely inappropriate level of bullying for a school." She saw the looks on their faces. "Yes, I know that any bullying is out of line, but as much as we try to stop it, it's not always possible. I mean, stealing someone's quill or a couple of coins from the purse is one thing, but attempted murder? That's an entirely different situation."

"True..." Harry sighed. "You know, when I met the Weasley twins, they seemed so cool. As I've got to know them, though, they've turned more and more... vicious."

Umbridge nodded, before heading for the door. "I need to go and arrange to have their brooms confiscated." She tapped her throat with her wand before opening the door. "Deliver your broom to my office within the hour, Potter!" She snapped in that revolting, sickly-sweet voice.

Harry grinned as he pulled out the carefully-transfigured fake Umbridge had slipped to him earlier in the month. With a casual flick of his wand, he reversed the shrinking charm on the fake, and cast a shrinking charm on his actual Firebolt, slipping it neatly into his pocket. He marshalled his face into a sad mask, before shuffling out of the door.

Harry smirked at the furious looks on the faces of Fred and George. "It was dreadful, really. The poor Weasley twins... being banned from Quidditch. Not for attacking Malfoy, but for an almost attempted murder."

Hermione gave the twins a mild glare as they fumed silently. "Picking on first years is reprehensible, regardless of their house. Threatening them with lethal poisons... you're lucky you weren't expelled and charged." She huffed for a moment, before turning back to Harry.

"About a week after I gave up my 'broom' to Umbridge, I gave Hermione a present; her own Firebolt. Even better, the registration number of the one I gave her was the one next to mine. We had sequential brooms, and we spent a lot of our free time flying..." He sighed happily. "Thanks to Professor McGonagall, who charmed them with really powerful notice-me-not charms, we flew all over Hogwarts grounds, racing, playing... good times.

"All through that term, I was having dreams. Visions, really. A long, black-tiled corridor. I didn't know what it was, or where it was... at first, anyway. I felt... compelled to go to the end of the corridor, and open the door. I knew the answers were waiting for me behind the door. When I woke up, I set up a conference call with Severus, Minerva, Albus, Sirius and Remus, while Hermione snuggled with me. I explained about the dream."

"It was at that point that Professor Dumbledore told us about the connection between Harry and Voldemort." Hermione took up the tale. She glanced over, seeing Rita Skeeter with a question on her lips. "The reason he didn't tell us before? Put simply, he wasn't sure, were you, sir?"

Dumbledore's portrait cleared its throat. "In a word, no. When Mr. Potter explained to me about the Third Task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament, the part where Voldemort used his blood, I wasn't sure what the consequences of such an action would be. Harry has always experienced scar pains whenever Voldemort was feeling an intense emotion. At the time, we simply didn't know."

"This vision was bait." Harry said bluntly. "It was designed to make me curious about whatever was at the end of that corridor. However, Voldemort didn't know that I hadn't been to the Department of Mysteries. He thought I already knew about the prophecy between us. I specifically hadn't heard it."

"I often wondered why." Snape spoke up from his portrait. "I would have thought you'd be eager to know it."

Harry just shrugged. "Well, as interesting as it was, it was, in a way, kinda pointless. Both me and Hermione were doing our absolute best to learn as much as possible, in all subjects. I didn't know when the confrontation with Tom would come, but I knew that I wanted to learn as much as possible. At the time, I didn't need to know the absolute specifics. It wouldn't have changed anything, would it?"

"No." Snape admitted. "I suppose not. You were both exceptional students. A true pleasure to teach." He smiled warmly at them, making several people in the audience flinch; they hadn't known he was capable of such a human expression.

"Where was I?" Harry asked. "Ah, yes. During that year, something extremely different happened: there was no attack or problem on Halloween. I was absolutely shocked. My entire life, something bad had happened on Halloween. First year, Hermione got attacked because of Ron's gob. Second year, Mrs. Norris got petrified. Third

year, Sirius 'attacking' the Fat Lady. Fourth year... the bloody tournament. Fifth year... nothing! It was fantastic." He sighed happily.

"You forgot about the DA." Hermione said. "That year, because of Fudge's cowardice and incompetence, we were all banned from Defensive spell-casting in DADA. So, with Umbridge's support and approval, under the table, of course, we started the Defence Association after our first Hogsmeade visit, with the nickname of 'Dumbledore's Army'."

In the portrait, Dumbledore grinned. "Yes... my own army. I was quite amused at that, I will admit."

Hermione grinned at the portrait. "Officially, myself and Ron had to heavily persuade Harry into starting it up, but in actuality, both Harry and I had already made some... discrete inquiries. We knew of a place to meet, courtesy of Dobby the house elf, we'd worked out a method of communication so we could avoid some of the more... difficult students."

"Read: Malfoy." Harry replied. "Little snot was running round the place like he owned it. It was a pleasure beating the shit out of him." He sighed happily again. "Good times."

"In fact, apart from Umbridge 'terrorising' the school," Hermione said with a grin, "the first term of fifth year passed quite well. We were again learning loads, and passing on some of our skills. A lot of the training came from Remus and Sirius. While both are pranksters at heart, they're both exceptional fighters and duellists."

The portrait of Sirius preened for a moment, before glancing over at Moony's image. "Hear that, Moony old boy? We're 'exceptional'."

Moony sneered lightly at Sirius. "Mr. Padfoot?"

"Yes, Mr. Moony?"

"Shut up."



Sirius' portrait blew a raspberry, before turning back to Harry, who was shaking his head mournfully. "Sorry, pup."

"Anyway..." Harry turned back to the crowd. "One night, just before Christmas, I got a vision while I was asleep. I saw Arthur Weasley attacked by a dirty great snake. Nagini. Voldemort's familiar. She was scouting the Department of Mysteries, getting the lay of the land. Because the vile creature was one of Voldemort's special friends," He said, indicating to those in the know that she was a Horcrux, "he had an unprecedented level of control over her. And because of the connection in my head, I could see exactly what she was doing."

"I woke up, leaning over the side of my bed and retching. Hermione woke up instantly, rubbing my back while I chucked, then vanishing the mess. I immediately called everyone on my communicator, notifying Dumbledore that Arthur had been attacked, then went to see McGonagall. Officially, I couldn't have told her any other way. Hermione sneaked back to her dorm using her invisibility cloak, so that there wouldn't be any issues."

"And my bed was cold." Hermione said with a ferocious pout. "It was horrible." She smirked for a moment. "And Lavender snores. Even worse than Ron."

"So, McGonagall came and got the four Weasleys, immediately sending them on to Grimmauld Place, while Molly went to St. Mungo's." Harry said. "Originally, I was planning to stay at Hogwarts during Christmas, only that plan was scuppered quite nicely. Both Professors McGonagall and Umbridge told me that the Ministry was going to be performing an 'inspection' over the Christmas holiday."

"That's not quite what I said, Harry." Minerva called out from the crowd.

"No." Harry agreed with amusement. "What you actually said was, 'the Ministry of Bloody Idiots are going to be crawling all over Hogwarts like flies on dung, and it'd be better for all of us if you weren't here.'"

Percy Weasley, once again, stood up. "The Ministry has a right to perform any inspection it wishes, at any time, Potter. Are you saying that you deliberately left?"

"Yes, I am." Harry said.

"And what did you have to hide?" Percy asked, his quill and parchment near fluttering in anticipation.

"Myself, naturally." Harry smirked. "Minion, the Ministry would have planted evidence to have me expelled and thrown into Azkaban, just because I was a political nuisance. By taking all my stuff with me, there was no way they could plant any evidence."

"They tried." Dumbledore's portrait spoke up again. "According to Delores, one of the inspectors found several Dark Arts items under your mattress. I pointed out, rightly, that there weren't there a day before, since we perform our own inspections. Auror Dawlish was not happy with that response."

Harry snorted. "Amazingly, I'm not surprised by that. He's a useless bugger."

"Agreed."

Hermione whispered in his ear for a moment, prompting Harry to nod. "Ah, yes. It was at this point, just before Christmas, that we had our last DA meeting of the term. According to what everyone 'knows'," the floating message above Harry's head flashed again, "Cho Chang tried to kiss me in the Room of Requirement. And it's true... she tried. Hermione kinda... took offense to that."

"Weepy bitch." Hermione sniffed disdainfully. "Making a move on my fella. Disgraceful."

"So, with Hermione's quick wand work, a small Confundus charm, Cho went back to her dorm, thinking that we'd kissed, while I promptly... well, myself and Hermione took nearly an hour to get back to the common room. I'll leave it up to your imagination. Ron asked me, when I got back, where I'd been, so I spun the tale about Cho

kissing me. He thought it was extremely amusing that Cho burst into tears.”

“Still don’t like her.” Hermione spat. “Honestly... she had no sense. ‘Ah, Harry saw Cedric die, so I’ll try and date him, to be closer to Cedric!’ For a Ravenclaw, she was remarkably dumb sometimes.”

“Play nice, Hermione.” Harry said softly. “She was grieving.”

“Fine.” Hermione pouted, before sobering up. “So, Harry went to Grimmauld with the Weasleys, while I, officially, went to see my parents. During the autumn term, my parents had gone back to their dental surgery, with a couple of members of the Order watching over them. Since the Order members had to be hidden, Sirius could take a couple of the shifts, while Remus was the other. Instead of going back to our house, Mum and Dad were portkeyed back to the warded area of Grimmauld. No-one ever knew they were there.”

“So, once at Grimmauld, Molly was again overbearing and bossy as she tried to take charge. She just didn’t seem to grasp the fact that it was Sirius’ house, not hers. She tried to rule it with an iron fist.” Harry snorted. “We went to see Arthur in the hospital, the twins bringing some of their Extendible ears with them. They listened in, hearing Moody explain about the vision. Naturally, the Weasleys jumped to completely the wrong conclusion, with little to no information. They assumed that I was being possessed, and treated me like a leper. Prats.”

Hermione took over. “When Harry got back to Grimmauld Place, he went and stayed in his room. The Weasleys thought that he was upset and distressed about being possessed. He wasn’t. It was because they were all staring at him. I got a letter from Ron, telling me that I had to come to Grimmauld to cheer him up.”

“Ironical, considering that she was in my bedroom at the time.” Harry said with a grin. “Basically, she apparated to outside the house, clutching her bag and suitcase, staying out there for a couple of minutes so she could get the appropriate pink-cheeks-from-cold look, then came bustling in.”

Hermione smirked at him. "I cheered Harry right up... I'll leave it to your imagination to work out how I did said deed." The gleam in her eyes and the dirty smirk on her face left little to the imagination. "So, I was staying in the main part of the house, slipping off every so often to visit my parents."

"Christmas morning..." Harry sighed. "I got a load of presents. It was curious. I never expected them. Some of them were really good, too..."

Flashback: Harry's Bedroom, #12 Grimmauld Place, London  
Monday, 25th December, 1995

Harry awoke on Christmas morning to find a stack of presents at the foot of his bed, Ron already half-way through his own, considerably larger, pile.

"Good haul this year." He informed Harry, through a mountain of paper and a mouthful of mince pie. "Thanks for the broom compass. It's excellent. Certainly beats Hermione's present. She got me a homework planner..." The look of disdain and disgust spoke volumes.

Slipping on his glasses, Harry reached for the first present, spotting Hermione's impeccably neat handwriting on a tag. He opened the book, spotting what appeared to be a neat, leather-bound book. He opened it up, spotting a scrap of parchment, with Hermione's writing on it.

Harry,

This is your 'public' present. For the love of god, don't let Ron or anyone else see it. I got Ron a homework planner, similar to this, but yours is a little more... risqué than his. I've got more presents, which I won't let anyone else see. They're up with Mum and Dad. I'll give them to you later.

Love you, stud!

Hermione

Harry grinned as he read the note, casting Incendio on it. He opened the homework planner, nearly dropping it when he saw a photo of a nearly-naked Hermione, wearing a thong and an immense grin. The little book squeaked out a message as the photo Hermione pointed to the thong. "Do it today, or later you'll pay!"

Ron looked up, rolling his eyes as he heard the little book squeak. "Yeah... mine does the same."

Oh, I sincerely doubt that. Harry thought as he turned the page, seeing the now-thongless Hermione, gently rubbing all sorts of interesting bits. Good lord... is that whipped cream? He closed the book, casting a sticking charm on it, so Ron wouldn't be able to see it. I don't think I can imagine a better way to get me to concentrate on homework. He thought with a smutty grin, which he carefully wiped off his face.

The next present was from Hagrid, a brown furry wallet with fangs. There'll be nobody putting their hand in my wallet now. Harry thought, pulling his hand back when the wallet snapped at his fingers. Huh... not even me. Glancing round, Harry reached in, gripping on of the fangs firmly and pulling it out. The wallet let out a pitiful moan, before it's other tooth was removed. Inside the wallet was a note, in Hagrid's thick and heavy script.

Harry,  
Got your present. Norbert would have been proud. How'd you make it? I appreciate it, though. Won't need to worry about starting my fire anymore!  
Thanks,  
Hagrid

Harry smiled to himself as he remembered the present he'd given to the half-giant Gamekeeper; a 24" perfectly-to-scale model of a certain Norwegian Ridgeback dragon, enchanted to fly around his cabin and play with him. Also, the small model was capable of casting small blasts of flame, fortunately, not big enough to burn down Hagrid's hut, but enough to start the fire. Harry was particularly proud of that present.

Reaching for the next box, which was heavy, he tore off the paper to reveal a set of twenty thick books. He quickly checked the tag, seeing it was a combined present from Sirius, Remus and Umbridge? He shook his head as he burnt that. He pulled out the first book, spotting the title Practical Defensive Magic and It's Use Against the Dark Arts. This'll help with the DA lessons. He thought, as he tucked the book back in it's box.

He thought about what he'd bought for those three. Sirius and Remus had almost identical presents; animated stuffed toys. A werewolf, a black grim, a small brown rat and a majestic stag, all chased to run around. Hermione had helped with the conjuration and charming of each of them. He'd been tempted to make each of them a banner, with 'Marauders Ride Again!', but decided against it. The final part of their gift was a neat presentation box, containing dog grooming products, and an awfully pink bling collar, with their Marauder names on it.

Umbridge had received a case of rare and expensive wines, something he knew from his detentions was her guilty pleasure. Half of the bottles were of wines so rare, they could only be bought for great expense from certain Knockturn Alley retailers. He had a suspicion it would be a very happy Dee when he returned to Hogwarts.

Putting the box of books to one side, he pulled a short box over. Is this a wand box? He thought at he ripped off the paper, reading on the tag that it was from Tonks. He opened the box, grinning.

"What's that, mate?" Ron asked, a hint of jealousy in his voice.

Harry reaching into the box, pulling out a model Firebolt.

"Oh... that's a bit tasteless, innit?" Ron asked, shoving another mince pie into his mouth. "I mean... she's just reminding you that your broom got confiscated, isn't she?"

And if my broom had been confiscated, you'd be right. Harry thought as he shook his head. "Nah, Ron. I'm sure it's just to keep the good memories about my broom." He pulled out his wand, tapping the

broom before waving his wand, the broom soaring where he pointed. "This is cool. I wonder where she got it from. Maybe I could get another, and have races."

"Sounds good." Ron said, a hint of jealousy in his voice.

Oh, grow the fuck up. Harry thought viciously. You got more presents than I did, and you're still jealous? Wanker. Harry pulled the broom back to him, putting it back in its box. He grinned as he thought about the present he'd given her; How to Walk Straight was a book about how to fool police when drink driving. It was a prank book, but he knew some of the tips might help her eternal tripping.

In the bottom of the box was another scrap of parchment, which Harry fished out.

Harry,  
Thought you'd like something to play with on Christmas morning (!). I just so happen to have given Hermione the exact same present. So, you can play with each other whenever you want. (smug smirk).  
Enjoy,  
Tonks

Harry shook his head at her poor innuendo, before tucking the box away. Right... what's next? He pulled a lumpy package forward, frowning as he saw the handwriting. Professor McGonagall? Hmm... she's never given me anything before. He was glad he'd given her a present; another stuffed toy, this one a perfectly sized copy of her Animagus form, stuffed with catnip. I bet she'll be all over the place today. He ripped open the present, spotting... Huh... this is... different. In his hand was a 12" action figure of... himself. He quickly read the note.

Harry,  
Nymphadora explained what present she was getting you for Christmas, so I thought this would be appropriate. The doll is the same scale as the model broom, so your small doppelganger can ride the broom. Nymphadora also told me that she has given the same present to Hermione, and she has her own copy of the doll.

I feel I should warn you, however, that the dolls are not just transfigured, but enchanted, courtesy of Professor Flitwick. They will respond just as you and Hermione would. The warning is that if the dolls are left alone together... well, they react pretty much how you and Hermione act.

You might wish to keep these dolls apart when there are certain parties present.

With Love,

Minerva (Grantabby)

Harry grinned. So, the two dolls will try and hump each other... that could be interesting to watch. He shook his head as he put the doll of himself on the bedside table, prompting a weird look from Ron. "What's that, mate?"

"Professor McGonagall sent it to me. Apparently, it's a scale model for the toy broom. The little me can ride the little Firebolt." And the little Hermione, too.

"Oh... why'd McGonagall send you a present?"

Harry shrugged. "I sent her something, so it's probably just something she transfigured off the cuff."

"Why'd you send her something?" Ron asked petulantly.

"Just 'cause." Harry replied firmly, letting Ron know the conversation was over. He secretly wished that he had Hermione's ability with Legilimency, so he'd know what Ron was thinking, although he could probably work it out. Let me guess, Ron; by buying a present for McGonagall, I spent less on you. Useless tit... I'm gonna have to Oblivate this, aren't I? Can't have Harry receiving too many cool presents. That'd make you look bad.

Shaking his head at Ron's blatant greed, he reached for the next present. Snape... huh. Wonder what he got me. He ripped open the package, spotting hoops, a model wall, and other assorted things. The hell... He grabbed the note. Ah, an obstacle course for the broom riders. Damn, they really worked together on this. Bless... He tucked the obstacles back into the box, putting the doll and model broom



with them, before tucking them at the side of his bed. I hope Severus enjoys what I got him. Harry had returned the favour, buying the man a series of Experimental Chemistry sets, from beginner to advanced, and even a set of professional Crime Scene investigation tools, thanks to that show he'd seen on the telly. I bet he'll love them.

The next package was from Dumbledore, clearly a book, with something squishy attached to the front. And our survey says a book and socks. He tore open the paper. And I was right. The book was thick, old, and very heavy. Defence Against Necromantic Rituals... could have done with this last year. Harry opened the book, pulling out the inscription parchment.

My dear Harry,

This book is the oldest and least-well known book on Necromancy. Normally, I would not even consider letting a student pick up this book, let alone read it, but I have a very strong feeling that it will be necessary in the days to come. Also, the two pairs of socks have been charmed to always maintain your feet at a comfortable temperature, and are nigh-on indestructible.

I will admit to opening my present from you last night. I have never seen a more garish collection of socks in my life, and for that, I thank you. I'm already wearing the pair of luminous yellow ones. They're very comfortable. I also appreciate the Muggle suit you bought. I will admit, at my rather advanced age, I find it difficult to know exactly what is and isn't in fashion. Thanks to you, my boy, I no longer need to worry.

All the best, Harry, and enjoy Christmas.

Albus Dumbledore, aka 'Grandpappy Firebird'

Harry groaned. The old man was never going to let him live that down! For the love of Merlin, he was only five! Shaking his head, he placed the books into the box next to his bed, pulling on one of the pairs of socks. He sighed as they warmed his feet up nicely.

The next parcel made Harry groan.

"Ah, that's from me!" Ron said proudly. "Go on, open it!"

Ripping the paper was just a formality, really. There was only one thing the box could be, and, ah, yes. Bertie Botts' Every Flavour Beans. When will he learn that I don't like them! I never have! "Cheers, Ron."

"No problem, mate. And if you need any help eating them..." He hinted, in what he undoubtedly thought was a subtle way.

"Sure, Ron. I'll know who to ask." As his watch passed over them, it began to vibrate ominously. And they're laced with Amortentia... why the hell would he offer to eat them if they're laced with Amortentia? Unless it doesn't work on family members? Nah, he's probably on a neutraliser potion, just like me and Hermione. He put them on his bedside table, intent on flushing them down the toilet as soon as he could.

The next lumpy present was, predictably, a Weasley sweater. This years was navy blue, a large 'H' sewn in. Good god, the woman doesn't learn! He thought. Why does she keep sending me this rude and insulting present? Every year! With a sigh of resignation, he pulled the jumper on, knowing that he'd get disdainful, hurt looks all day if he didn't, and he couldn't be arsed fighting with the Weasleys all day. Underneath the sweater was a box of mince pies. It's official; she doesn't learn. I still don't like mince pies. His watch vibrated again, indicating yet more love potion. "Hey, Ron? Do you want my mince pies? I'm not really fond of them."

"Sure!" Ron said, bounding from his bed to grab the 'treats', quickly stuffing two into his mouth.

Ah, he must be on neutraliser potion. Otherwise, he'd be rushing off to shag Ginny right about now. Screwing up the wrapping paper, he came to the last present, a large, flat rectangle. He saw on the tag the nearly-illegible scrawl of Dobby. He got me a present? How sweet! He ripped off the paper, spotting a painting. It took him a moment, and three turns of the canvas, but he finally saw what it was supposed to be. He painted me...

“Dobby!” Harry called out, summoning the elf to him. With a ‘crack’, Dobby appeared, wearing an impeccably neat black butler’s suit, with bow-tie and cufflinks.

“Harry Potter sir!” Dobby squealed. “Dobby is thanking you, Harry Potter sir, for the present.”

“No problem, Dobby. Merlin, you look smart!”

“Thank you, sir!” Dobby said, near-tears with happiness.

“I got your painting. I’m honoured that you’d choose to paint me, Dobby.”

“That’s supposed to be you?” Ron asked, staring at the painting. “Are you sure?”

Harry ignored the prat. “Thank you, Dobby.”

Dobby nodded, his ears flapping in the breeze. “Dobby is glad to serve, Harry Potter sir, but Dobby must rush back to school. We’s getting ready to serve dinner, Harry Potter sir.”

“Okay, Dobby. Thank you again.” Harry said, watching the elf vanish. He discretely reached under his pillow, pulling his wand.

“Oh, Ron?” He waited until the gormless redhead was looking at him. “Obliviate! You only saw the presents from you, your Mum and Dad, Dobby, Hermione, Tonks and Sirius.” He tucked the wand away, making sure to hide the other presents before clicking his fingers in front of Ron’s face. “You okay, mate?”

Ron blinked. “Hmm? Yeah, I’m fine. Must have had too many mince pies.”

“Yeah. You should save some room for dinner, mate. I know how much your Mum likes to serve.”

Nodding, Ron went back to his bed, picking up scraps of wrapping paper.

A pair of cracks announced the arrival of the twins. "Don't go downstairs, yet." They warned together. "Percy the prick has sent his jumper back, unopened." One twin said.

"No note." The other added. "Mum's crying again."

"Ah." Harry pulled himself out of bed. "Anyway, chaps, if you'll excuse me, I need the loo, and I need to brush my teeth. I'm willing to bet my morning breath could cut through Gringotts vaults at the moment."

After brushing his teeth and having a quick wash, Harry fled from the room, making certain again his other presents were hidden, and had a notice-me-not charm protecting them. He headed down the hallway until he came to Remus' room, knocking on the door. After a moment of no answer, he opened the door, sticking his head round.

"Remus? Are you... oh, god!" He yanked his head back, shutting the door as quickly as he could.

"Harry?" Hermione came down the stairs from the warded section, where she'd been passing presents to her parents. "Are you okay?"

"No! My eyes! My eyes!" He protested. "Remus... Tonks... little red riding hood... bad!"

The door opened, revealing a pair of blushing adults, one with pink hair and a poorly-tied bathrobe, while the Remus had pulled on a pair of sweat pants. "Er... morning, cub." Remus said, blushing like a bride.

"Morning, Remus." Harry said through the hands covering his face. "I'd say 'good morning', but it looked like you were having one of those, and I interrupted it."

"Wotcher, Harry." Tonks said. "Er... Merry Christmas?"

"Merry Christmas, Tonks." Hermione said cheerfully. "Me and Harry will be going now. Perhaps a locking charm next time?"

“Yeah...” Remus said. “Please don’t tell Sirius. He’ll never let me hear the end of it.”

“O-Okay.” Harry said, looking up at Remus properly. “God, Remus, lose the collar!”

Reaching up to his neck, Remus fingered the pink bling collar Harry had given him as a joke. “Er... say nothing.”

Tonks snorted in laughter. “Sorry, Harry, that was my fault. I just couldn’t help myself.”

“See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.” Harry said, as Hermione pulled him away. “And please, don’t remind me of this, ever again.”

“I promise!” Remus and Tonks said together, before fleeing back into the bedroom, the ‘squelch’ of a locking charm on the door.

Hermione pulled him into a conveniently empty bedroom, sealing the door with her own Colloportus. “Now, Mr. Potter...” She pounced and kissed him like her life depended on it. As far as Harry was concerned, his life did depend on it, and he kissed her back just as thoroughly.

After a few moments, they pulled away, the need to breathe becoming urgent. “Good morning, Hermione.” Harry said politely though his gasps. “You’re looking ravishing this morning. Did you get my presents?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes. I’ve always wanted the standard ‘little black dress’. I didn’t know it was quite that little, but I like it.” She gave him a saucy grin. “Plus, some of that lingerie looks delicious.”

“It is.” Harry replied. “Half of it’s edible.” He waggled his eyebrows. “Who needs Christmas dinner when I could just eat you?”

“Behave, you dirty-minded little creature.” She mock-scolded him.

“Er... did you see the pictures in that planner you gave me, Hermione? Honestly, that’ll keep me going on those long, cold nights...”

“No, I’ll keep you going on those long cold nights.” Hermione corrected him. “And going... and going...” She sighed happily. “Anyway, I’ve got a few... naughty things upstairs for you, too. Some sugar-free chocolate body paint, which I’m sure I’ll enjoy licking off you, and a couple of outfits that would make every witch in Hogwarts jealous.”

Harry’s dirty grin was contagious, making Hermione stare at him adoringly. “Ooh, my Mum and Dad asked me to pass on a message to you. Dad said, ‘Absolutely’, and Mum said, ‘it’s about bloody time!’ They didn’t tell me why, though.”

Pumping his fist into the air, Harry let out a strange happy moan. He took her hand, and dropped to one knee. Hermione’s eyes widened in shock as she took in his pose.

“Hermione... I love you. Have done for years. I asked your Mum and Dad for permission to ask you a certain question. Now, I know we’re not old enough now to get married, but I’d like to on my sixteenth birthday, when we’re both old enough. Hermione... will you marry me?”

Hermione’s nodding reminded Harry of Dobby just a few minutes before. He pulled an older-style ring from his pocket, gold with a medium-sized diamond embedded in the centre. He placed it onto her finger, kissing the back of her hand tenderly. “I love you, Hermione.”

Using a strength she didn’t know she possessed, Hermione hauled Harry to his feet, before trying to inhale his tonsils. There were tears in her eyes, but even the perpetually dense Harry could tell that these were tears of happiness.

She pulled back, resting her forehead against his. “Oh, Harry, of course I will.” She looked down at the ring, before her face fell. “But... I can’t wear it, can I? Everyone will know then...”

Harry smiled. "No worries, Hermione. That's the Potter family engagement ring. It's got certain spells and enchantments on it. One of them hides the ring from view, unless you want people to see it, or they already know about the engagement. So basically, you, me, Sirius and your parents."

She gazed at the ring for another moment, before looking at him. "God, I want to ride you right now..."

"We can't, Hermione." Harry said sadly. "I'm still underage, remember. Not for another seven months and a week."

Taking a moment to think, Hermione grabbed hold of his jeans, and tore them open. "Okay, so I can't ride you... but I can still show my appreciation." She dropped to her knees, prompting Harry to let out a happy gurgle. He gasped when he felt Hermione's lips pressing up against his pubic hair, her bottom lip rubbing against his testicles.

"Oh, that's good..." He let out another gasp as Hermione's hands began to wander over his flesh...

Harry looked at the fuming Ron, and the pale and shocked Ginny and Molly. "You see, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said firmly, "it wouldn't have made a difference if Ron stayed with us on the Hunt. I proposed that Christmas, and we were married seven months later on my sixteenth birthday. But, we'll get to that later."

Hermione snuggled against him for a moment, watching the vast majority of the Weasleys fuming. She leaned up to whisper in his ear. "Is it wrong that I'm feeling rather smug and superior watching them flail about down there?"

Shaking his head, a small on his face, Harry replied. "No. I am, too." He cleared his throat, and looked up. "Professor Snape came to Grimmauld Place to talk to me. When Arthur and Molly came home, they heard an argument between Sirius and Severus. However, it wasn't quite what they thought..."

Flashback: The Kitchen, #12 Grimmauld Place, London  
Monday, 1st January, 1996

Harry stepped into the kitchen, seeing the Potions Master stood by the table. "Potter..." He hissed malevolently. Further inspection of the room revealed Sirius, lounging against the fireplace.

Closing the door, Harry flicked his wand. "It's okay, sir. It's all silenced and sealed. I put an imperturbable charm on the bottom of the stairs.

Snape's face relaxed instantly. "Fine. What have I told you about calling me 'sir'?"

"Probably the same thing I've told you about calling me 'Potter'." Harry retorted. "I believe it was 'don't!'"

Grinning, Snape sat down. "I have some news for you, Harry. And you, as well, Sirius."

Both Harry and Sirius sat down, squirming slightly on the hard and uncomfortable chairs. "So, what's up, Sevvie?" Sirius asked with a grin.

"Lucius Malfoy recognised you on Platform 9¾." Snape said without preamble. "He immediately reported seeing 'a suspicious black Animagus' to both Voldemort and Minister Fudge." He sighed. "I know you don't like it here, Sirius, and that sneaking around the Grangers' dental office isn't fun, but until we can capture the rat, it's simply not safe for you. Fudge will have you kissed instantly."

Sirius sighed. "I know... but, I had to see him off, Severus, you know that."

Snape nodded. "I understand, Sirius, believe me. If I was in your position, I'd do the same. I'm well aware that you're an adult, and you're perfectly capable of making your own choices. I just don't want you to get hurt."



Harry grinned. "You know, the people who went to school with you would never have believed you just said that, Severus."

"Yes..." Snape drawled. "I'm cold and unfeeling. I'm evil, sadistic and greasy. I've heard it all before." He sighed dramatically. "Feel the angst, people."

After a moment of feeling the angst, Snape continued. "Also, I have news from Tom. He's aware of the connection between you, and is apparently planning on using it to plunder your mind. Your Occlumency is certainly up to the task, but Voldemort's Legilimency is near-legendary for it's power."

Harry nodded. "I know I've got good shields. Is he planning to wear them down?"

Snape nodded slowly. "Yes... like all truly excellent Occlumens, your shields can withstand a high-intensity assault, but they're not designed to withstand a siege."

"Until Voldemort, no-one could maintain a siege." Sirius replied. "I remember hearing about it from Regulus. He was bragging about capturing Fenwick. They utterly demolished his mind." He shuddered. "What does Albus have to say about it?"

"When you get back to Hogwarts, I'll be working with you to shore up your shields. One of the advantages of working from the shadows like he's doing now is that he has plenty of time. He'll spend most of his days pecking at your shields."

"So..." Harry sighed. "He's planning on going for the 'death of a thousand cuts', instead of a cannon blast."

"Yes. Once a week, possibly more, we'll work together on shoring up any cracks in your defences. I'd also recommend that you spend more time meditating. Miss Granger is becoming a reasonably proficient Legilimens. Ask her to make periodic checks, see if she can spot any cracks in your defences."

"Makes sense." Harry replied. "Do we know..." He suddenly stiffened. "Incoming!" He stood, pulling his wand and removing the charms from the door. "Weasleys!" He hissed.

Both Snape and Sirius drew their wands, puffing deeply a few times to make their faces red.

"Be evil!" Sirius hissed, aiming his wand. "Are you calling me a coward?" roared Sirius, pushing Harry to one side.

"Why... yes, I suppose I am." Snape said.

Harry quickly headed up to Sirius, beginning to push him back from Snape.

"Harry... get... out... of... it!" snarled Sirius, trying to push him aside with one hand.

The kitchen door opened, and the entire Weasley family, plus Hermione, came inside, all looking very happy.

"What's going on here?" Molly demanded, her hands sinking onto her hips.

"Monday evening. Six o'clock, Potter." Snape drawled silkily, swooping out of the kitchen.

"Great..." Harry said mournfully, plopping himself down at the table. "More lessons with Snape... it doesn't get any better."

"Now, I know what Ron and several other people are thinking here." Harry said firmly. "That Snape was raping my mind, opening me up to Voldemort's attacks. He wasn't. On the contrary, he was working hard to help me repair the damage Voldemort was committing."

Ron began waving his arms, his face a beautiful purple colour. Harry nodded at Arthur, who cancelled the silencing charm on the annoying redhead. "That's bullshit! I saw you when you came back to the common room! You were in pain! He's an evil git! I bet he memory charmed you!"

Harry shook his head absently. "I had weekly checks for spells, enchantments and memory charms, Ron." He said casually. "Have done since mid-second year. They're all detailed in my medical file, locked in Madam Pomfrey's office. No, you just can't accept that 'the evil, greasy git' played you like a fiddle."

"You're lying!" Ron snapped. "I'd know, Potter, if you weren't telling the truth."

"Well... you didn't know." Harry replied firmly. "Severus Snape was not a Death Eater. Hadn't been for fifteen years. He told me why he took the Mark. Explained his reasons. I understand them."

"You're wrong! He killed Dumbledore!"

The portrait of the aged former Headmaster cleared his throat. "Mr. Weasley, we have not yet gotten to that point of the story. I have been telling people for years; I trust Severus Snape. He has never once lied to me, told a falsehood, or done anything which would make me doubt his loyalty to me, the Order of the Phoenix or Hogwarts."

"Well, he fooled you then!" Ron snapped, making several people round the hall groan. Everyone knew that it was impossible to fool Dumbledore.

"If you insist, Mr. Weasley." Dumbledore said amiably.

Arthur was about to flick his wand at his son again, but was stopped. "Have you ever told me the truth, Potter?" Ron asked, attempting to go for sympathy. "All these years when you've said you're my friend... you've lied to me."

Harry shrugged. "I told as much truth about our 'friendship' as you did, Ron. You were never my friend. All I was to you was a source of money, gifts and fame. Since pretty much first year, you've seen me as a mark, nothing more. Same for your Mum, your sister and the twins. Don't worry... we'll be getting to your part of the story soon enough. The betrayals. The lies. The thieving. It's all to come. Arthur, if you would..."

The silencing charm was reapplied, making Harry and Hermione sigh in relief as the blissful silence overcame the hall again.

“Now, we were up to the return to Hogwarts...” Harry pondered for a moment. “Ah, yes. Shortly after we got back to Hogwarts, and I had my first major Legilimency attack, a wave of emotion came over the bond between myself and Voldemort. I could tell his was absolutely ecstatic over something. Felt like he’d just had a screaming multiple orgasm.”

“Yeah,” Hermione said, a hint of venom in her voice, “it put you right off a fumble that night. I was most annoyed.”

“The following morning, when we got up and went to breakfast, we found out why Voldemort was doing a happy dance the night before...”

Flashback: The Great Hall, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Tuesday, 9th January, 1996

Breakfast was a sombre affair that morning. The aftermath of Voldemort’s near-orgasm and the resultant pain in Harry’s head had completely turned him off scratching Hermione’s itch, resulting in both of them being slightly irritable.

She understood, of course, and didn’t blame him in the slightest, but that didn’t change the basic fact: a horny Hermione is not a happy Hermione.

The owl from the Daily Prophet arrived, launching itself from the table after payment. Hermione unrolled the paper quickly, slamming it onto the table. She let out a distinctly un-ladylike shriek that caused everyone in the vicinity to stare at her.

“What’s up?” Harry asked instantly.

"Well... it's clear why he was happy last night." She whispered to him, pointing at the paper.

Harry quickly glanced at the article, which covered the break-in and prisoner break-out of Azkaban. "Oh, hell..." He muttered. Glancing round, he tapped his wand against his watch. "Potter to Dumbledore." He whispered.

Hermione glanced up at the Head Table, noting Dumbledore glancing down at his watch. She saw his lips move, but over the hustle and bustle of the Great Hall, that wasn't surprising.

"Confirmed." Harry murmured, lowering his sleeve. He leaned closer to Hermione. "His office, straight after brekkie. Conference." He felt her nod, then carried on eating.

Straight after breakfast, sending Ron off to the common room, Harry and Hermione raced to Dumbledore's office, where the room was set up for a conference, Professors Snape, McGonagall and Umbridge sitting patiently, drinking tea, while Sirius, Remus and the Grangers were in front of the communication mirror, munching their way through a truly impressive stack of toast.

Harry sat down heavily, pouring himself and Hermione a cup of tea. "Please, sit down." Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling slightly.

"Sorry, sir." Harry muttered.

"Don't apologise, Harry. I understand from the portraits and Professor Snape that you experienced Voldemort's glee yesterday evening. I would be... irate, too."

"That's one way of putting it." Harry replied. "I would have gone with 'nauseous and a migraine'. Bastard never has any consideration for anyone else."

Sirius chuckled. "I don't think it's high on his list of priorities, pup."

"No." He sighed. "So, Voldemort's managed to recover the core of his inner circle from Azkaban. And no doubt, the Dementors would have fled with them. Explains his happy dance last night. Question is, what do we do about it?"

Umbridge released the glamour gauntlet, fading into her much more attractive base form. "I told that useless little cum stain that he should remove the Dementors. Professor Dumbledore said the same thing... now we've got this." She sighed. "This is gonna be absolute hell. It took five Aurors last time to capture Bellatrix, and only Moody survived the battle... with one less leg."

"What's Fudge done so far?" Snape asked.

"The press release." Dee replied dryly. "He hasn't even restored the budget to the Aurors. Put simply, there's no funds available to train new Aurors, purchase better equipment... he's accusing Sirius of being the ring-leader of this little band, and still denying Voldemonkey's return."

"'Voldemonkey'?" Dumbledore repeated, his face widening. "I've not heard that one before. My personal favourite is 'Mouldywart'." Hearing McGonagall clear her throat, Dumbledore sobered up. "Ah, yes, my apologies. I've already sent every available member of the Order out to look for the escaped prisoners, but it appears that Tom has managed to hide his location very well."

"What about Malfoy?" Harry asked immediately. "Is he still prancing about the Ministry?"

Umbridge sighed and nodded. "Yes... I headed there this morning, as soon as I got the owl. Little shit-eater had a smile on his face, a spring in his step and a song in his heart." She huffed. "Wouldn't have minded removing all three."

"Eh?" Hermione asked.

"His face, his foot and his heart." Dee clarified. "Ideally with some battery acid. We could stand, watch, point and laugh."

"You're vicious." Sirius said from the mirror, approval very evident in his voice.

"Excuse me." Dan Granger's voice sounded. "I'm afraid I'm not quite clear on what's happened. You said some prisoners have escaped from Azkaban?"

Harry nodded slowly. "Yes, but it's much worse than that. Picture... Freddy Kruger, Jack the Ripper, Leatherface, Jason Vorhees, Pinhead, Mike Myers, the Master... people like that. Utter psychopaths with no morals and the power to back it up."

"Oh..." Dan blanched slightly. "How did these people escape?"

"The Minister of Magic is an incompetent wanker." Snape spat. "We've been warning him since June that this would happen, and the spotty little git didn't listen."

"Worse than that." Umbridge said. "He's not ordered any searches. He's not increased security patrols. If it was a reasonable Ministry that we were dealing with, we could get the little shit voted out of office. Unfortunately, he's got his 'yes-men' in every corner of the Ministry, sealing his position. It'd take something hellishly dangerous or powerful to get him out now."

Emma Granger turned to Dumbledore. "Aren't you the head of your parliament? Couldn't you do something?"

Dumbledore chuckled mirthlessly. "Unfortunately, I no longer hold that office. Last summer, I told Cornelius about the return of Voldemort, as well as necessary steps. He arranged to have me removed from the Wizengamot, which is the parliament you mentioned, as well as the International Confederation of Wizards. In basic terms, he has removed my political fangs and clout. At the moment, the only thing I have is my reputation, and he's been working for six months to have that tarnished. I'm neutralised."

"He's been doing the same to me." Harry added. "Normally, the 'Boy-Who-Lived' would have some pretty impressive political clout, but ever since October '94, I've been branded an attention-seeking

psychopath. This sort of action will give us both some points, but we're still way behind in the court of public opinion."

Hermione had been silent for a while. "Maybe... maybe there's something we could do about that." She said slowly. "The court of public opinion, I mean. If we were to arrange to have an article printed up, detailing everything that's going on, maybe we could get it out there."

"The Prophet would never print it." Umbridge said at once. "At the moment, they're nothing more than Fudge's propaganda machine, greased by Percy Weasley. There's also three Ministry 'inspectors', which are actually spin-doctors, who approve all stories going out."

"So, we don't use the Prophet." Hermione said. "We could do it as leaflets, leaving them in places like the Leaky Cauldron, the Three Broomsticks and the Hog's Head, or we could use the Quibbler, you know, Luna's Dad's paper."

Umbridge blinked, before growling. "I'm absolutely disgusted with us." She said, glaring lightly at Dumbledore, McGonagall and Snape. "Why didn't we think of this? Sweet Merlin, we've got three centuries plus of experience in this room, and it takes a sixteen year old girl to point out the obvious."

Hermione preened for a moment, before sobering up. "What we'll need is a way of getting the story written properly. A known name..." She smirked evilly. "Skeeter... the chubby cow's not been able to get a job with the dirt I have on her..."

"Dirt?" McGonagall asked. "Have you been blackmailing her?"

"Maybe a little." Hermione admitted. "We worked it out last year, how she was getting all those exclusive interviews with the Slytherins. She's an Animagus, an unregistered one. An ugly little beetle. I got her to agree to a non-aggression oath last year. If we could get her to write an article, print it using the Quibbler and leaflets, people would know the truth."

Dumbledore nodded, then look at Snape. "Severus."



“Five points from Gryffindor, Miss Granger, for pointing out our obvious flaws!”

“Another five points from Gryffindor for being a ‘know-it-all’!” Umbridge added, before turning to McGonagall. “Minerva?”

“One hundred points to Gryffindor, Miss Granger.” The old Scotswoman said proudly. “For an outstanding idea, and another ten points to Gryffindor, Mr. Potter, for dressing so smartly today.”

Again, Hermione preened, while Harry chuckled. “Sometimes, I wonder about you lot, I really do...”

“I’ll write to Skeeter during Defence, Professors.” Hermione said. “Arrange to meet her in the pub on the next Hogsmeade weekend. We can do the interview then, and get it into the paper.”

“There’ll be flak from all sides.” Umbridge pointed out. “As the official Ministry liaison, I’ll be expected to rebuke Mr. Potter, loudly, publicly and painfully.” She pondered for a moment. “I think a Hogsmeade ban would be the one.” She didn’t bother to wait for the protests. “What I’ll do is write a sub-decree, stating that Harry James Potter is banned from going to Hogsmeade... via the main doors. You know which passage to sneak through, don’t you?”

“The one-eyed witch.” Harry replied, smirking. “Dee, you’re devious and sneaky. I like you.”

Umbridge blushed prettily. “Thank you, Harry. This way, I’m keeping the Ministry of Bumbling Fools happy, while not actually affecting you. Officially, I don’t know about your invisibility cloak, nor your copy of the Marauders’ Map, so those will be invaluable.”

“One thing I would suggest,” Dumbledore said, “is that we escalate the training of the Defence Association. With the Dementors defecting to Voldemort’s control, it is imperative that you start teaching the Patronus charm, to as many people who can manage it. Obviously, not all of them... hell, let’s tell it as it is, none of them can drive a

hundred away, Harry, but it make give them the time they need to escape.”

“A hundred?” Umbridge repeated. “You never told me that!”

“It... it wasn’t anything special.” Harry said with a blush. “Just... you know... a Patronus.”

“We’ll talk later, Harry.” Umbridge said firmly, slipping her gauntlet back on. “I shall see you in class. Make sure you bring parchment and quill. I must go and annoy some Slytherins for a while.”

“So, with the Headmaster’s, Deputy Headmistress’ and High Inquisitor’s permission, we escalated the training of the Defence Association. Patronus charms, high-level shields, powerful hexes. We trained people as best we could. Unfortunately, too many people thought it was just a lark, training so they could pass their exams.”

Hermione sighed. “Also, lots of people came up to Harry, asking him to explain what was happening. These were the same people who, a mere four months previously, were calling him an attention-seeking lunatic. Now, they were looking at him as though he wasn’t quite as mad as the Prophet made him out to be.” She huffed. “Hypocrites...”

“Then there was people like Susan Bones.” Harry added. “She hadn’t come up to me, telling me I was a psychopath. Instead, she did the sensible thing. She waited for more information, before making a decision. I don’t blame her for that. Like Hufflepuffs, she’s loyal. Loyal to the Ministry, her friends, her family and Hogwarts. She didn’t jump to conclusions. She waited until she could make an informed choice.”

“Then there’s Seamus.” Hermione huffed. “Little snot decided that Harry killed Cedric, and was making up lies about Voldemort coming back. Soon as the Death Eaters were announced as having escaped, he came up to Harry, trying to cosy up to him. Little git...”

“When my interview got printed in the Quibbler, Umbridge immediately moved to ban it. Hermione pointed out something dead obvious: what better way to get people to read it than to make it against the rules? By forbidding every copy of the Quibbler in

Hogwarts, she made every student read it.” Harry smirked at Percy, who’d turned the traditional angry-red.

“I was shocked at how sneaky she was.” Hermione admitted. “Had she left it alone, only a few people would have read it. Devious little Dee...”

Harry took a drink of his water before continuing. “It was in April that the Ministry dropped another bollock. One of the members of the Defence Association, Marietta Edgecombe, reported to her mother that there was an illegal gathering of students at the school, and she told them about the name. Fudge, I believe, instantly got a hard-on, and immediately contacted Umbridge, who admitted that she’d heard the rumours that day.

“She immediately went to Dumbledore and told him that Fudge knew, and that his plan to remove the Headmaster from his position was about to be put into effect.”

The portrait of Dumbledore smiled. “It was marvellous... I’d have several months off. A two month paid holiday, meaning I could direct more time and energy to ferreting out the Death Eaters. I told Delores to continue the plan, using this as a valuable opportunity to discover which students supported Voldemort. When Fudge came to arrest me... ah, a marvellous adventure.”

“Yes, fleeing by phoenix.” Harry said sombrely. “You should have seen Fudge’s face. He looked like he’d just been buggered witless by a Centaur.”

Wrinkling her nose at the image, Hermione picked up the tale. “It was then that the Inquisitorial Squad was instituted. People like Draco Malfoy swaggering round the school, taking points left, right and centre. I still remember when the little shit took points off me for being a Mudblood.”

Harry nodded. “Yes... shame about the bowel-loosening hex and the impotence curse I hit him with. I don’t know if they ever found a cure for that...”

Percy stood up, clearing his throat. "Am I to understand that you attacked the pureblood heir of a Noble house, Potter? You caused him to become sterile?"

Harry scowled at Percy. "No, I prevented the little shit from trying to rape people, Percy. It was an impotence hex, easily curable by the people at St. Mungo's, or anyone who's read a DADA book. He wasn't sterile. He just couldn't get it up until the curse was removed."

Scribbling his notes, Percy sat down. Hermione leaned in to whisper. "He's going to recommend that all your assets be removed from Gringotts and paid to the Ministry and the Malfoys for the offence. After all, you're just a jumped-up half-blood, and I'm an uppity Mudblood."

"He's in for a shock, then." Harry whispered back, before straightening up. "So, Dee had managed to identify the Voldemort supporters in the school, although they didn't know that their lofty new positions was actually a way to keep tabs on them. Each time they took points, Umbridge passed them across to Professor McGonagall, who slipped them back. They were pretty much useless."

"We started taking our exams at the end of May," Hermione said with a grin, "and what a time we had. It was when the examiners arrived at the school that Ron decided maybe it was time for him to begin studying. Of course, officially, myself and Harry were taking our OWLs, ten for me, and nine for Harry. Unofficially, we were doing a lot more."

Harry picked up the notebook from the podium, flicking through until he came to the section on exams. "Yes... officially, Hermione was taking ten classes; Ancient Runes, Arithmancy and Care of Magical creatures, on top of the seven core subjects. I was taking nine, Care and Divination on top of the seven. Unofficially, I took all twelve subjects, while Hermione took eleven."

"I still think Divination's bollocks." Hermione said primly.

"I enjoyed it." Harry smirked, before turning serious. "Not to mention, the pair of us were taking four NEWT exams, too. We decided to get

Muggle Studies, History of Magic, Astronomy and Care out of the way, so we could focus on the other subjects. We were taking fifteen and sixteen exams each, hiding at the back of the Great Hall for our NEWTs."

Hermione sighed. "So many exams, so little time..." She murmured. "We absolutely kicked arse on them, though."

"The Astronomy OWL was interrupted by Hagrid's attack." Harry took up the story again. "Umbridge and four Aurors headed down to Hagrid's hut. We asked her, afterwards, what the hell was going on. She told us that she was trying to warn him to go, while the Aurors were trying to arrest him. She knew that he was half-giant, and that stunners wouldn't really affect him, but Professor McGonagall's arrival kinda messed things up. The Aurors were all in 'fight' mode, and stunned her."

"It hurt." McGonagall said plaintively from the audience. "Four stunners to the chest..." Professor Flitwick put his hand on her shoulder, nearly having to stand up in his chair to reach the curiously tall Scotswoman.

"It was during my History of Magic OWL, which curiously, I took after I'd already done my NEWT, that I got a vision in my head. It showed Sirius being tortured." Harry carried on. "As soon as I left the exam room, I bolted into the first empty classroom I could find, and contacted Sirius on my communicator. Fortunately, Professor Dumbledore was at Grimmauld Place, along with Remus, and I explained the situation. Obviously, I knew that Sirius wasn't at the Department of Mysteries."

Sirius cleared his throat from his portrait. "In my defence, it was a good plan."

Harry sighed. "It may have been, Sirius... and if it wasn't for that evil little house elf of yours, it probably would have worked, too."

"After we'd completed the exam, me and Hermione set up a conference call between the teachers, and ourselves. We needed to make a plan of action, and quickly..."

Flashback: Defence Against the Dark Arts Office, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Friday, 21st June, 1996

“Okay, is everyone on-line?” Harry asked into his watch.

“This is Padfoot. I’m here, tail wagging!” Sirius’ cheery voice called up.

“This is Moony. Unfortunately, I’m getting whipped by the wagging tail.”

“Shut up, Moony!”

“This is the Batman. I’m hiding in my office.” Snape called out, a hint of amusement in his voice. “Fortunately, I won’t be the one ending up with dog-hairs on my clothes.”

“This is Grandpappy Firebird.” Dumbledore chuckled.

“Will you ever let that go?” Harry asked, exasperated. “Sweet merciful Merlin, sir, I was five years old!”

“No.” Dumbledore replied. “I enjoy it.”

“Evil...” Harry muttered. “Professor McGonagall, are you there?”

“This is Grantabby.” McGonagall said. “And I think I prefer mine to yours, Albus.”

“And I’m here with Hermione, and Dee.” Harry concluded. “Okay, let’s get to brass tacks. Voldemort sent me a vision of Sirius being tortured in the Department of Mysteries. If I was to hazard a guess, he’s trying to get me to go and get the prophecy.”

“That is his plan.” Snape said. “He wants it, but he’s not really prepared to go and get it himself, unless he has no choice.”

“So, he wants me to go to the DoM. Which means it’s a trap. Death Eaters will be waiting there, either to capture or kill anyone who’s there. My first thought is to simply destroy the prophecy orb. Unfortunately, we’ve gone past that point, haven’t we?”

“In a word, yes.” Dumbledore replied. “Since he has only just sent you that vision, he will already have his men in place.”

“Craptacular.” Harry griped. “Okay, can we use the fact that they’re there? Capture them?”

“Difficult.” Sirius said instantly. “They’ll have no doubt fortified themselves. They’ll be waiting for you to turn up, alone, and then they’ll come out.”

Moony cleared his throat. “It’s possible... we could use this.”

“Elaborate.” Harry said.

“If you were to go to the Ministry, with a contingent of the Order, it may be possible to expose them. Severus, do we know how many personnel Voldemort’s put into place?”

“No. The only people who know about it are sworn to secrecy. Since I’m here at Hogwarts, I haven’t been informed about who’s carrying it out. I would expect at least ten, maybe twelve people. They’ll be hiding in the Hall of Prophecies. I’d expect several lower-level Death Eaters throughout the rest of the Ministry, there to mop up in case someone escapes.”

“So, Moony, you’re suggesting that I go in as bait, while the Order tackles the Death Eaters?” Harry asked, no emotion in his voice.

“It’s certainly an option, Harry,” Moony said, “but to be honest, it’s something I’m reluctant to mention. I know that you and Hermione are at least the equal of any of the Death Eaters, but there’s a very high chance that you’ll be overwhelmed with numbers.”

Harry looked at Hermione, who nodded, then at Umbridge, who was frowning. She cleared her throat. "Allow me to clarify, Moony; Voldemort's men are already inside the Ministry?"

"That's what we're guessing, Dee." Moony answered. "They've picked a good time, too. All the Aurors are out, half of the Education department's already at Hogwarts, the DoM never works full-staff on Fridays... it's a perfect time. There's virtually no security there."

"This is troubling..." Umbridge said. "They won't hesitate to slaughter everyone in the Ministry, if they need to." She thought furiously for a moment. "Is there the possibility that this is a diversion?"

"A diversion?" Dumbledore asked. "What makes you think that?"

"With respect, Headmaster, Hogwarts is a very tempting target for Voldemort right now. You're not here, Minerva's gone, Hagrid's on the run, the Inquisitorial Squad think they have control... there's very little in the way of opposition here. If this is a ruse to get Harry and Hermione out of the school, he could take over very quickly."

"No." Harry said. "I don't think it is. He wants the orb, more than anything else. I don't think this is a diversion, and I don't think he'll sit on the sidelines. He'll be there, hiding at first to keep an eye on his troops, but if he needs to, he'll fight. I can feel it."

Hermione cleared her throat. "Remus, how many Order personnel do you have available right now?"

There was a pause as Remus checked. "If I include Sirius, then we've got six available right now. Albus, me, Sirius, Tonks, Mad-Eye and Kingsley. At least half of the Order are away at the moment, and most of our powerful fighters are unavailable."

"Six..." Harry repeated. "Even if we were to take all of the DA, we'd be hard-pressed... Sirius, what do you think?"

"Well..." Sirius took a moment. "My first instinct is to scream 'No!' at you... but that's not really my call. This is gonna be dangerous, no matter what, pup. It could end up getting us all killed. But, on the



other hand, it's an opportunity to capture a good number of Voldemort's personnel. Maybe if we can get certain people, like Amelia Bones, or even the Fudgie one himself there, they'd see him." There was a sigh. "It's your decision, Harry. I'll support you, no matter what."

"Hermione?" Harry asked. "What do you think?"

She smiled at him, quoting something he'd said to her a while ago. "'We'll do what we always do.'" Harry grinned at her, completing the phrase in unison with her. "'We'll stand and fight.'"

"Sirius, Remus, grab your gear. We'll be setting off as soon as I can work out the best way to get to London."

"There's something else we should do first." Umbridge said, holding up her hand to stop Harry from moving. "Just in case this is a diversion, we should arrange some protection for the school."

"What do you have in mind?" Dumbledore asked.

"The Centaurs." Umbridge explained. "The Forbidden Forest is their home. They'll protect it. If we can arrange an alliance with them, maybe recruit Hagrid's brother, then we can make sure Hogwarts is defended."

There was silence for a few moments, until Dumbledore spoke up. "You know about Grawp?"

"You can't hide a twenty-foot giant in a twenty-foot tall forest, Headmaster." Umbridge chided gently. "He's not exactly inconspicuous. Damn... need to find a way to get to the Forbidden Forest without suspicion..."

Harry smirked. "I have a marvellous idea..."

"So, we came up with our battle plan. I'd 'break in' to Professor Umbridge's office to use the Floo, officially checking up on Sirius. She'd be able to 'catch me' in the act, and we'd spin the silly story about 'the weapon being ready', and then sneak into the forest."

“Unfortunately for us,” Hermione continued, “Ron, Ginny, Luna and Neville caught up with us. We tried to leave them behind, but Ron’s need to play the hero and Ginny’s blatant worshipping of Harry made them want to come, while Neville and Luna just wanted to help us out.”

“So, we took Umbridge into the forest, where she negotiated for four teams of Aurors to be stationed in there at all times. It was actually a cool deal. They’d make sure the Acromantulas and other assorted nasties didn’t encroach on Centaur territory, and would work with the Centaurs to make sure that any Death Eaters that tried to sneak in would be... dissuaded of such a foolish notion.” Harry’s smirk was decidedly predatory. “Dee stayed with them in the traditional meal after an alliance, while me and Hermione snuck back into school to grab our gear.”

“Ron and the others had disabled the Inquisitorial Squad and came up to us, Luna with the idea of using the Thestrals to head to London.” Harry sighed. “Unfortunately, the fight in the Department of Mysteries was pretty much canon.” He smirked at the silly reference. “Hermione was injured, badly, by Dolohov. I put her into an enchanted sleep, a form of stasis, that would keep her safe and protected until she could receive medical attention.

“However, there weren’t twelve Death Eaters there. There were thirty-two. The reason why Dumbledore and the Order took so long to get to us was that they were fighting their way through the twenty lower-level Death Eaters, while the six of us students were fighting with the Inner Circle in the Death Chamber.”

Hermione rested a hand on his shoulder, glancing at the portrait of Sirius, who nodded sadly. “Unfortunately in that fight... Sirius was killed by Bellatrix, her AK knocking his body through the Veil.”

“I could have killed her right there and then.” Harry said, his tone like ice. “I chased after her, heading to the atrium... I wanted to rip off her head and spit down her neck... the bitch. I managed to get a spell past her, knocking her down.” Harry stared at Percy Weasley. “Contrary to popular reports, I didn’t use the Cruciatus on her,

tempting as it was. Instead, I turned the floor under her feet to ice, then hit her with a bone-breaking hex to the hips. From what I was told, it would have shattered her hips nicely.

“Voldemort apparated into the atrium, from wherever he’d been hiding. Dumbledore Floo’d up from the Department of Mysteries, and the pair of us duelled Voldemort. Sneaky bugger started using FiendFyre... another basilisk to slay...” Harry frowned in remembrance. “Then, the final nail. He tried to possess me. That hurt...”

“Fortunately, for me anyway,” Hermione continued, “Harry was more than a match for him. His Occlumency, not to mention his love for Sirius, James and Lily meant that he could push him out.” Harry cleared his throat noisily, staring intently at Hermione. “Okay... his love for me, too.”

“Thank you.” Harry said. “Voldemort pretty much ran screaming from my head, his entire body in absolute agony. The blood protection from my Mum, although greatly weakened, was still effective at close range. Fuelled by my utter love for Hermione meant that he had no way of possessing me.” He sighed. “Fudge Floo’d into the Ministry to see Voldemort there before he apparated out. Silly bugger froze right up, too. Finally, I’d been vindicated. I wasn’t lying.” He snorted. “I only wish it hadn’t cost me so much...”

Hermione pulled him into a hug, while the portraits behind them maintained a respectful silence. It took Harry a few moments to gather his wits. Even now, two years later, it was still a painful memory. He kissed the tip of her nose before he pulled away.

“Straight away after the fight, Dumbledore gave me a Portkey back to his office, while everyone else was taken to the Hospital Wing. I will admit, I was frantic about Hermione. When Professor Dumbledore Floo’d back to Hogwarts, he stopped in the Hospital Wing to check up. It was then that we had a very serious conversation...”

Flashback: Headmaster’s Office, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Saturday, 22nd June, 1996

Harry sat slumped into one of the hard chairs in front of Dumbledore's desk. It had all gone so wrong... the Death Eaters forces were far stronger than anticipated, and it had cost Sirius his life. His godfather... He sniff back a tear.

The fireplace roared as Dumbledore stepped through, brushing ash from his robes. He sat behind his desk, taking a lemon drop from the bowl and sucking comfortingly on it. He didn't speak; he knew Harry would have a lot to get off his chest.

"How's Hermione?" Harry asked immediately.

"She will be fine." Dumbledore replied. "The wound was serious, but your stasis ensured that she wasn't too badly injured. It'll take a few days, and more than a few rather unpleasant potions, but she will make a full recovery within a week. The scar, however... the scar will remain."

"I... I was arrogant." Harry said after a few moments. "I should have made sure we didn't go."

Dumbledore stayed silent.

"Bellatrix... she just... she just killed him. Like he was an annoying bug, not a member of her family." He looked up, hot tears burning in his eyes. "Sir, what did I do wrong?"

"You didn't, Harry." Dumbledore replied comfortingly. "No-one did anything wrong. You're familiar with the phrase 'no battle plan survives contact with the enemy'. We did everything right."

"We should have done better." Harry murmured. "All of it... yeah, we accomplished the mission, stop Voldemort getting the orb, but the price..."

"I've been where you are now, Harry." Dumbledore said after a few moments. "Back in 1944, Grindelwald attacked a small village, killing

the inhabitants. My wife and my baby daughter were there. Both perished in the attack. It was that vile action that led me to challenging Grindelwald to a duel, and defeating him. I felt such rage... hatred... pain."

"Does it get better?" Harry asked, his face a mask of agony.

"Yes... and no, Harry. You will never stop missing him." Dumbledore said sagely, wanting to reach out and embrace the young man in front of him. "He will be in your thoughts for as long as you live. The sharp pain you're feeling now will fade, given time. Occasionally, it will pop up, but for the most part, you will adapt. You will remember the good things about him, the pranks, the jokes... Christmases and gifts. You will look back on situations, thinking about how Sirius would have enjoyed them."

Harry nodded, thinking furiously. "Kreacher must have betrayed us somehow. How else would they know that we were spending time together?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes... I spoke with the vile creature before we left Grimmauld Place. He was crowing about how he'd been to see Bellatrix, when Sirius ordered him out of the house at Christmas. Thanks to Kreacher, Voldemort knew about your great love for Sirius, and his for you."

"Is the little shit still alive?" Harry asked, venom in his voice.

"He is." Dumbledore confirmed wearily. "As... pleasurable as it would be to kill him, Harry, that kind of thought-

"I know." Harry replied, sinking back into his chair. "The thought of killing the little cunt is so..." He looked up. "Sorry, sir... killing the little git is appealing... but I know it's wrong."

Dumbledore leaned back, offering the bowl of lemon drops to Harry. "Could I make a suggestion, Harry?"

"Of course, sir?"

“Feel free to smash something.” He gestured to the over-cluttered shelves behind Harry. “Take out your rage on something. I wouldn’t normally recommend it, but the release will do you good.”

Before he’d finished speaking, a cyclone of raw magic erupted from Harry, tearing through the contents of the shelves like a hot knife through butter. The shiny instruments broke, smashed and even melted under the onslaught.

Dumbledore conjured a china bust of Bellatrix’s head on a pedestal, then conjured a beater’s bat. Harry instantly swung the bat, smashing the china. Another bust appeared, this one of Kreacher. It, too, joined the debris on the floor. Another bust, of Voldemort, appeared, and was smashed. Another Bellatrix. Smashed. A quarter of an hour and 186 pieces of crockery later, Harry slumped back into his chair, his rage and body exhausted.

“Feel better?” Dumbledore asked gently.

“Yes... quite a bit, actually.” Harry replied tiredly. “It’s a shame that wasn’t really Bellatrix’s head.”

“Yes... that would make things easier, wouldn’t it?” Dumbledore asked rhetorically. He looked at the fireplace. “Ah, good. Remus is about to Floo in. Would you like a moment alone?”

Harry shook his head, dashing to the fireplace. As soon as Remus stepped through, he was enveloped by grieving fifteen year old. The two clung to each other, stepping absently to one side when the fireplace flared up again, revealing Tonks. She was quickly pulled into a three-way hug, all of them grieving for the old mutt.

Dumbledore sat patiently, knowing that the only thing that could truly make Harry feel better was lying in the hospital wing. Neither Harry nor Hermione would be able to heal without the other. In a way, although tragic, it was rather heart-warming to the old man.

After sitting down, Harry kept a firm grip on Remus’ shoulder, and Tonks’ hand. “Remus?” He asked, sniffing slightly.

“Yeah, cub?”

“Do we include Tonks?”

Said pink-haired Auror looked up.

“Your call, cub.” Remus said. “It would make things easier in certain ways, harder in others.”

Harry looked at him. “Come on, Remus... she’s your girlie, isn’t she?”

Tonks blushed and nodded, while Remus glowed red for a moment. “Yes...”

“So, she’s in.” Harry concluded. “Professor, I think it’s time to hear that bloody prophecy. If it was important enough for Sirius to die for, then we need to know it.”

Dumbledore stood, going over to the cupboard and pulling out his Pensieve. “It all started when I was interviewing Professor Trelawney in the Hog’s Head, sixteen years ago...”

Harry glanced at the portraits behind him, and the communication mirror, where Moony and Tonks were listening. “It was horrible...” He muttered, before turning back to the stage.

“After leaving the Headmaster’s office, I went straight to the Hospital Wing, where I fell asleep holding Hermione. The pair of us slept for pretty much the whole day, waking up on Sunday morning. Thankfully, Madam Pomfrey had put up privacy screens for us. The last thing we needed was to be gawked at by everyone.”

Hermione took over the tale. “The Sunday Prophet turned up, and there, on the front page, in big, bold letters was the headline, ‘He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named Returns!’ Yeah... Harry hadn’t been saying that for nearly a year, had he? By that point, Dumbledore had immediately been given back all his positions, once again ICW member, Chief Warlock and Headmaster, and they were singing his praises.”

Harry stared into the crowd, his unrelenting gaze locking on Rita Skeeter, and not blinking. "The Prophet was singing my praises, too. Saying how I was 'the lone voice of truth... perceived as unbalanced, yet never wavered in his story... forced to bear ridicule and slander...' Curious how they just forgot to mention that it was them that was doing it, isn't it, Skeeter?"

"It was at that point I knew I could never work with the Ministry of Magic. They were biased, racist, bigoted and utterly corrupt. It was that day that my belief in our government died. And do you know why?" His gaze swivelled to Percy Weasley. "Tell me, Weatherby, do you know why I could never work for the Ministry?"

Percy was intimidated as hell by those killing curse-green eyes. "N-No..." He stammered.

"Because, not once, in any way, shape or form, did they apologise to me. The Prophet was scrabbling around, trying to kiss my arse, yet all that did was piss me off. They didn't apologise to me, either. They just printed more lies and innuendo." Harry's gaze never wavered. "Not once... and yet, the Ministry expected me to support them. Ha!"

Hermione cleared her throat. "One thing that was quite amusing, something we needed, really, was Umbridge. She came back into the school, escorted by Dumbledore, and was promptly sent to the Hospital Wing. The official story was that the Centaurs had tortured her."

"Hmm..." Harry chuckled. "The actual reason was that she was taking a couple of days off after an all-night bender with the Centaurs. Love 'em or not, they make one hell of a fine ale. She was suffering from a really bad hangover."

He snickered a bit more, before sobering up. "I decided to go outside and see Hagrid, when who should I run into? Bad Faith and the Book-Ends." He stopped, then turned to Hermione. "They could be a band!"

"Behave." She swatted at his shoulder gently.



“Anyway, Malfoy came swaggering up to me, telling me how I’d pay for putting his father in Azkaban. It’s a shame, really... I was hoping to put Ferret Senior into the morgue. Hmm... I chatted with Hagrid, who pointed out that Sirius, if he had to die, wanted to die in battle.”

“Which was true.” Sirius’ portrait called out. “Or having a heart attack after shagging a set of blonde twenty year old triplets. That could have worked, too.”

“Pervert.” Harry said fondly over his shoulder. “Bless Hagrid... not a harmful bone in his body. That man knows the benefits of sitting quietly and reflecting... Actually, where is Hagrid?”

Minerva McGonagall got up, and rushed up to the stage, whispering in Harry’s ear. “Really?” He asked. “Huh... don’t think we want to disturb them right now, then.” He shuddered. “Somehow, that’s not an image I want in my mind. I do hope Olympe doesn’t howl...”

Both Harry and Hermione shuddered together, while McGonagall returned to her chair.

“There was one other conversation we had with Professor Dumbledore, before breaking up. And that was with regards to Voldemort’s immortality.” Harry said.

Dumbledore’s portrait cleared his throat. “Yes... and please, do not bring that up again. I didn’t know.”

“We’ll get to that, sir.” Harry replied. “Albus told us that he was looking into it, and had several leads, but until he’d gathered more intelligence, he didn’t want to get our hopes up. Fortunately, he kept meticulous records, even co-opting sections of the Ministry for his search.”

“I didn’t see the point on taking you on fishing expeditions.” Dumbledore defended himself. “Half of that summer was a complete waste of time. It would have taken you away from your studies, and I didn’t want to do that, unless I had something concrete for you.”

Harry sighed. "It would have been better for all of us if you had... but, we're getting ahead of ourselves here."

"We took the Hogwarts Express back to London, where Harry's vile relatives were waiting for him. Myself and a few members of the Order were waiting to have a little 'chat' with them. We promised them a world of pain if they tried to hurt Harry." Hermione informed them all primly. "The basic plan for the summer was the same as previous years, with one rather large exception, which we'll come to later. We'd Portkey back and forth, using our time to learn and train."

"That summer, although I was grieving for the loss of one of my father figures, I knew I had something to look forward to." Harry said warmly, reaching down and taking Hermione's hand. "Something that would give me no end of happiness."

Sighing, he looked about the hall. "Now, if you'll all excuse me, I think we're going to take a fifteen minute break. I could use the bathroom, and possibly liaise with the elves to get some food sent up. There's still two years to go, and there's a lot more to cover."

Hermione pulled Harry's hand, leading him to the antechamber off the Great Hall. She slammed the door, silencing it and sealing it. "Okay, Potter, we've got ten minutes. I want at least two." She started to pull her jeans down. "Get to it."

"Yes, ma'am." Harry replied, as he grabbed her and crushed his lips to hers...

## - CHAPTER SIX -

School Year: 1996-1997

The Great Hall, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Saturday, 1st August, 1998

Harry limped back into the Great Hall, feeling an overwhelming need to sit down. His legs had buckled partway through his... private meeting with his wife, and he just wanted to sleep. But, no... still have sixth and seventh year to cover yet. Damn you, Hermione... if only you weren't so ravishingly sexy.

While waiting for Hermione to freshen up, read; put her knickers back on, Harry faced the portraits. The obscene smile on Moony's face told Harry that he knew where he'd just been. "Feel better, cub?"

Harry grinned tiredly. "Yes and no. Yeah, I feel better, but I'm really thirsty, and my legs are aching."

A glass of Butterbeer appeared under his nose, his rather tousled wife smiling at him. "You gave me three, Potter... I'll give you a reprieve... this time."

Taking and draining the drink, Harry smiled back. "A reprieve? Hmph..."

"Okay, I'll give you three back tonight." She offered, a gleam in her eyes.

"Agreed." Harry said loftily. "After all, it's only fair."

"Prat."

"Harry?" The portrait of James called out.

"Yes, Dad?"

"Er... an elf with half an ear left you a plate of sandwiches." The portrait pointed to a small table that had been set up.

"Ah, Kreacher..."

"Don't eat them!" Sirius snapped. "Little git probably poisoned them."

"Nah." Harry replied, grabbing a sandwich. "He's been much better behaved recently." He grabbed a sandwich. "Ooh, lamb." He was about to bite into it, when he changed his mind. Grabbing the notebook off the podium, Harry banished it with a flick of his wand, before conjuring two obscenely padded armchairs. "I need to sit down." He told Hermione. "My legs are killing me."

"Ah, you're gettin' old, Harry." Hermione said, sliding into the chair next to him.

"Says the woman ten months my senior."

She rolled her eyes. "Women never grow old, Harry. We just... grow more distinguished."

"Hmm..." Harry said thoughtfully, passing across a plate and the tray of sandwiches. "If you say so, darling."

"I do."

"Yes... I can tell."

She took a bite of her sandwich. "And mint, too..."

After demolishing two sandwiches, Harry looked into the crowded audience, each of whom was snacking on some delicious elf-made sandwiches. "So, where were we?"

"End of your fifth year." McGonagall called back.

"Ah, yes." Harry took the now-refilled glass of Butterbeer from Hermione, drinking half of it. "Yes. Let's see... As I got back to Durzkaban, I checked in with Hermione and Moony, to see if they'd heard anything about my summer plans. Of course, I had an event that I really needed to get to on my sixteenth birthday. For the most

part, though, myself and Hermione carried on with our advanced studies. We knew we'd have to wait a while for our OWL results to be sent out, but we didn't see a need to stop because of that.

"Again, we portkeyed to each other's houses, learning, practicing, studying. While Albus was on his fishing expeditions, we listened in to his reports. Most of his time was wasted, since the leads were utterly cold. We were coming late into the game, and we were quite behind."

"One thing we did that summer was prepare for the war that we knew was coming." Hermione said. "The Ministry was sending out useless leaflets for us to read about defending ourselves. We were way past that. We started working on magical foci. Both of us had wands, but we were developing... issues."

Harry smirked. "By 'issues', my lovely wife means that we were both too powerful to use a wand. Any time we cast high-level spells, which was particularly evident during duelling, we started to damage them. During one notable duel, Hermione's wand actually caught fire. So, we started to research staves." He saw the looks of incomprehension. "We couldn't use wands, so we had to use multi-cored staffs."

Both Harry and Hermione twisted their wrists, long, jewel-encrusted battlestaves appearing across their laps.

Percy Weasley was on his feet again. "You are aware that it is illegal to purchase staffs without registering them with the Ministry?" He asked, scribbling down more notes.

"Yes, we are." Harry and Hermione replied in unison.

"So, you admit your crimes?"

"No, we don't." Again, in unison. Harry continued. "We made these ourselves, and had them registered through the Department of Magical Law Enforcement in the summer after our sixth year. But, we'll come to that."

Percy raised an eyebrow. "I would have seen those documents. You are clearly lying, Potter."

"If you say so, Percy." Harry replied. "Just remember..." He pointed up to the floating message above the stage, 'You only 'know' what we wanted you to believe', flashed again. "Now, sit down and shut your gob, you pathetic sycophant."

The two staffs vanished as the users willed them away. "So... ah, yes. One thing that tickled both me and Hermione was listening in to one of the meetings that Fudge had before he got booted out of office..."

Flashback: The Granger Residence, Crawley, London  
Friday, 5th July, 1996

Harry had spent most of the day at Hermione's house, reading through some of the 'fascinating and informative' leaflets the Ministry had sent out. From what he could tell, the basic gist of the leaflet was 'run, hide and wait for the Aurors'.

Hermione was reading over his shoulder. "I wonder if Fudge has put the budget back for the Aurors." She mused absently.

"I doubt it." Harry said reasonably. "I bet he's still-"

He was cut off by his communicator watch beeping. "Dumbledore to Potter."

With a grin, Harry tapped the watch with his wand. "Here, sir."

"I don't have much time, Harry." Came Dumbledore's voice. "I'm about to go into a meeting with Minister Fudge, and I'd like you to listen in. Code 7."

"Confirmed." Harry tapped the watch again.

"What's a Code 7?" Dan Granger asked.

"In basic terms," Hermione replied, her voice slipping into her lecturing tone, "it means he wants us to listen, but not interrupt. Harry's muted his communicator, so it doesn't send any sound."

"Cool." Dan nodded, then sat back when he heard the voices come through.

"Ah, Dumbledore. Glad you're here."

"Cornelius. What can I do for you? I'm very busy."

"We're all very busy, Dumbledore! With the return of You-Know-Who, the entire Ministry's in an uproar!"

"I told you, over a year ago, Cornelius, that Voldemort had come back. You chose not to believe me."

"You never offered any proof!"

"I was unaware that I am considered a liar, Cornelius. But, no matter. You have finally admitted the truth. What do you want of me?"

"Potter."

"What about young Harry?"

"I want to speak to him."

"What about?"

"That's between me and him!"

"Yes, it would be. However, you have spent twelve months slandering and attacking him, Cornelius. You even tried to have him expelled from Hogwarts simply for defending himself against Dementors that your office sent. Why on earth would Harry wish to speak to you?"

"Potter will come to the Ministry, and declare his support of our efforts."

"I doubt that."

"I wasn't asking, Dumbledore!"

"I know, Cornelius. However, you must ask yourself; what efforts have you undertaken that will persuade Harry to support your administration?"

"I am the Minister of Magic, and he will support me!"

"He will not, Cornelius. And neither will I. Because of you, we have lost over a year of preparation time. We should have a fresh crop of Auror trainees in the Academy, and we have none. There is no budget, since you cut it a year ago. You have failed in your duty, Cornelius."

"Potter will be able to save my administration. You will bring him here and make him support me."

"I will not."

"If you don't, Dumbledore, I'll see you arrested for treason!"

"You will be able to try, Cornelius. However, you will be out of office mere minutes after that order is sent out. Because of your corruption and greed, accepting bribes from known Death Eaters, we stand to lose everything. I have already notified the Wizengamot, and your vaults have been seized by Gringotts."

"What?"

"The money from your vaults has been diverted into the training and recruiting of new Aurors. You're broke, Cornelius, and will shortly be voted out of office as the fool that you are."

"Get me Potter!"

"I will not. You have lost, Cornelius. I only hope your replacement will be able to clean up the disgraceful mess that you have left."

"How dare-"

"Goodbye, Cornelius."



Harry looked up, smirking evilly. "You know... sometimes Dumbledore really kicks arse."

"Harry?" Dumbledore's voice came over the watch.

"I'm here, sir."

"I'm just in the bathroom at the moment. Cornelius wants you to save his administration. I believe that I spoke correctly?"

"Oh, you did, sir." Harry replied. "I wouldn't piss on that man if he was on fire."

"Thank you for that lovely image, Harry."

"My pleasure, sir."

"I know, for an absolute fact, that Cornelius will be out of office within the next week." Dumbledore said firmly. "Personally, I'd like to see the little coward in Azkaban, but alas..."

"Do we know who's gonna replace him, sir?"

"There are two people in the race, Rufus Scrimgeour, the head of the Auror Department, and Amelia Bones, the Director of the DMLE. Either of those would be leading the Ministry on a war footing, which can only be beneficial."

Hermione cleared her throat. "I've heard of Bones, strict but fair. Not heard anything about Scrimgeour, though."

"He was an Auror for almost thirty years." Dumbledore said. "A fighter. One of the reasons he's a popular choice is that he has managed to stay out of most of the political infighting in recent years. However, he, like all of the Ministry, is aware of your rising star again. There is a high degree of possibility that he will want you to support him, as Fudge wanted."

Harry thought for a few moments. "That really depends on how good he is. If he's prepared to take the fight to Voldemort, I may consider it."

"Indeed." Dumbledore said. "I must go. Yet another blasted meeting..."

"Have fun, sir." Harry said, tapping his wand against his watch. "Marvellous... I'm a hero again."

"You always were, Harry." Hermione said, wrapping him in a hug. Dan picked up on Hermione's unspoken desire to have a moment alone with her beau, sneaking out to the kitchen. "You've always been my hero."

Harry kissed her tenderly. "I can live with that."

Harry cleared his throat. "Even then, the Ministry of Magic was trying to use me for their own gains. Fudge wanted me to come into his office and save his administration, but he still forgot the most basic thing; he hadn't apologised."

Again, Percy Weasley climbed to his feet. "The Minister of Magic does not need to apologise to you, Potter. You are a British subject, and therefore are subject to Ministry law."

"I know." Harry replied. "And I never said I wasn't."

"Then when the Minister ordered your presence and support, you should have gone."

"I disagree." Harry answered firmly. "I am subject to Ministry law, that is correct, and I have obeyed that law. However, asking me to support him, even after he launched a smear campaign, is not required of me."

"You're wrong." Percy contradicted stubbornly. "The Minister of Magic is the ultimate authority. If they ask for your support, you should offer it."

Harry sighed heavily. "Percy, we can keep going back and forth about this, and neither of us will change our minds. You, because you're a prejudiced bigot, and me because I'm right. At that point, I did not support the Ministry."

Percy eyed Harry warily. "And now?"

"We shall see." Harry replied cagily, before waving at Percy to take his seat. "Continuing..."

"It was Scrimgeour who won the election, simply because Voldemort killed Madam Bones during the summer, personally. That told both myself and Hermione who should have taken office. At the time, we took Scrimgeour's election with a pinch of salt. If we only knew..."

"While we were studying, Professor Dumbledore was scouting out various locations, looking for Voldemort's trinkets. We listened in to each mission, even though most of them were... well, wastes of time, really."

"I did say that." Dumbledore's portrait said. "That's why I didn't take anyone with me. They were fishing expeditions, nothing more."

"Not all of them." Hermione said darkly, before looking over at the crowd. "I'm sure nearly everyone here remembers that during the summer of 1996, Professor Dumbledore's hand turned black and dead. He never really explained that publicly, for very good reasons. After all, hunting down Voldemort's toys was not exactly something that should become public knowledge. If it were, they would have been moved, and we would have been in trouble."

Harry continued the story. "Mid-July, the sixteenth, to be precise, Albus went to another location, in the Gaunt shack in Little Hangleton. This was Voldemort's mother's home, and the place where Voldemort learned some of his family history. While on the fishing expedition, which me and Hermione were listening in to, he encountered... resistance."

Flashback: #4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey  
Tuesday, 16th July, 1996

"Is that even possible?" Hermione asked, watching the replica dolls of her and Harry fumbling with each other on the desk. "I'm fairly certain my back couldn't bend that far."

Harry was eyeing the pair of dolls. "I still wanna know why McGonagall made them anatomically correct. My next question would be; 'how does show know that anatomy?'"

The little doll of Harry waved at the real Hermione, before turning back to the plastic doppelganger and impaling himself. "Good lord..." Hermione muttered. "Do me a favour, Harry, and don't do that the first time."

"Okay..." Harry tried to pull his attention away from the fornicating dolls, but it was hard... difficult, difficult to look away. He was saved by the beeping of his communicator.

"So, what are we listening to?" Hermione asked as she leaned on the torture device that the Dursleys considered Harry's bed.

"He's on another mission." Harry reported, fountain pen and pad at the ready to take notes.

"Harry, Hermione, can you hear me okay?" Came Dumbledore's voice.

"Right here, sir." Harry said. "I've written down your location. Have you done the ward check yet?"

There was silence for a few moments. "I have." Dumbledore replied. "There aren't any wards, at least, none that I can detect, but there are magical traces in the area. Strong ones."

"No wards..." Hermione replied. "That's... curious." She looked up at Harry. "Do you think it's bait?"

"It's possible." Harry replied, scribbling down notes. "Albus, can you tell what kind of traces?"

Another pause. "The short answer would be 'no', simply because I am unsure myself. They're potent and powerful, but they're also... muted, somehow. It's extremely curious."

"Do you think there's a Horcrux there, sir?" Harry asked.

"Again, Harry, I don't know." Dumbledore admitted. "I would go so far as to say it's certainly possible there is a Horcrux here. If there are defences or defenders, that may be part of the signature."

Harry was scribbling down notes, which could be summed up as 'I don't know'. "Okay, sir. Will you be going inside?"

"I shall."

The two could hear the soft crunches of gravel underneath Dumbledore's feet as he slowly, cautiously made his way forward. Hermione cocked her ear. "Headmaster, stop for a minute." The crunching stopped instantly. "Harry, can you hear that?"

Both teens listened hard for a moment. "Sir," Harry said urgently, "there're snakes nearby. They don't sound too happy, sir."

"Indeed?"

"Sir, if there are live defenders, even if they're just snakes, there's a much higher chance that this is a protected site." Hermione said immediately. "You shouldn't go on alone, sir."

"Just a little further, Hermione." Dumbledore said softly. "I'm sure I could go in a little further before I need assistance."

"Sir, this isn't the time!" Hermione near-shouted. "Those snakes are pissed, sir, and will attack!"

"All the more reason for me to continue now than to leave." Dumbledore said. "A little ice should be enough to keep them out of the way."

Harry sighed. "You're too bloody stubborn, sir. Use salt-water ice and an couple of electro spells, sir. Should be enough to keep them away."

Both teens listened as Dumbledore intoned, "Salvitaementi!" the salty version of the water charm, before, "Electro!" The sound of hissing, spitting and popping filled the communicator.

"I'm really glad I can't see that." Hermione muttered, knowing instinctively what the popping noise was. "I bet that's a messy place."

"The snakes are out of the way." Dumbledore said. "Evanesco! I'm inside the shack. Of course, there's a dark tunnel ahead of me. Where else would I need to go but the dark tunnel?"

"Did you take the flashlight with you, sir?" Harry asked. "If I know Riddle, and unfortunately, I do, he'll have some kind of trap set up for any approaching magic users."

"Oddly enough," Dumbledore replied, a hint of amusement in his voice, "I did bring a few odds and ends with me. It's only a pity I couldn't bring a flamethrower."

"Maybe next time." Harry said, shaking his head. "That man watches too many movies." He whispered to Hermione. She giggled and nodded, before turning serious. "Sir, can you see anything else?"

"One moment..." Dumbledore said. "Yes... yes, it appears to be a dark tunnel."

"Sir." Harry replied dryly. "I'll make a note of that. Are you sure you shouldn't turn back, sir? Get some backup? I'm sure Remus or Tonks would be able to come with you."

"Ah... did I forget to mention? A ward appeared over the doorway. I don't think Tom wants people to turn back."

"You're trapped?" Harry asked, scowling at his watch.

"Quite so." The old man sounded far too cheerful, considering. "There is a light ahead." Dumbledore spoke up. "Some kind of chamber. I do believe that this is the source of the magical traces."

"Sir, call Fawkes to you." Hermione urged. "If there's something in there-"

"Believe me, Miss Granger, I heartily approve of the suggestion." There was a tone of dry mirth in Dumbledore's voice. "Fawkes!" A blast of song announced the arrival of the ancient firebird. "Now... let us see what Tom has left us with."

"Shouldn't you flame out, sir?" Harry asked. "We don't know what's going on-"

"I am here now, Harry, and quite a capable wizard, despite my advanced age. I'm sure that between myself and Fawkes, we will be able to investigate this location." There was a thread of steel in Dumbledore's voice. "We do not know what kind of warning is in place. It's possible that Tom will know about this, and make arrangements to move... oh, bugger."

"Sir?"

"There are more than snakes here, my young friends. A least a company of Inferi, and what appears to be a very large scorpion."

"S-Scorpion?" Hermione stammered.

"Yes... at least thirty feet long."

Harry was scribbling down notes. "Sir, I think it's time to go. You should go any further without backup."

"Harry-"

"No!" Harry snapped. "This isn't the time for heroics, sir. This needs to be a team effort."

There was a roar of flame over the communicator. "Oh dear."

"Let me guess... you can't flame out?"

"No, I can't." Dumbledore said plainly. "It appears that Tom was very methodical in the protections for this chamber. Fawkes isn't able to leave that way, and there is a Black Magic ward on the door. Not even he can pass through."

"What can we do, sir?" Hermione asked.

"Alas, there is nothing you can do to assist. I, however, shall take a page out of Mr. Potter's book."

"Sir?"

"I shall stand, and I shall fight." Dumbledore announced firmly. "As it happens, I'm rather good at battling Inferi."

"And giant scorpions?" Harry asked snarkily.

"For everything, young Harry, there is a first time." Dumbledore chuckled. "I really wish I had that flamethrower right now."

"Focus, sir." Harry groaned.

"Indeed. Fawkes, my friend... would you care to begin our dance?"

The teens heard a blast of Fawkes' song, along with the characteristic 'whoosh' of high-powered Incendio charms. Dumbledore didn't speak to them as he melted the animated corpses, along with a strange clattering sound.

"Do you think that's the scorpion?" Hermione whispered to Harry, who nodded.

"Must be. What do you know about Scorpions off the top of your head?"



"Practically nothing." Hermione replied quickly. "Entomology was never a hobby of mine. I do know that it'll have a really tough exoskeleton."

"Indeed." Dumbledore boomed over the watch. "And it's remarkably manoeuvrable, too." There was a grunt, before Dumbledore screamed.

"Sir?" Harry and Hermione were on their feet, grabbing wands.

Another blast of phoenix song erupted, but this sounded almost... angry. Harry heard a screech, which he knew from his experience in the Chamber of Secrets was Fawkes beginning a dive, before the muffled sound of an impact.

"Fawkes!" Dumbledore shouted, his voice filled with pain. "Oh, Merlin..."

"What's going on?" Hermione demanded.

"I've been stung in my arm." Dumbledore wheezed. "Fawkes just dived into the scorpion's head and began to burn. There's... there's not a lot of the scorpion left."

"Headmaster." Snape's silky voice drawled over the communicator. "Where are you, sir?"

"I should be returning to my office in Hogwarts via Portkey momentarily, Severus. I just need to collect Fawkes." There was a revolting splat, and the cries of a newborn phoenix. "Hello... what are you?"

"Sir?" Harry, Hermione and Snape asked together.

"Ah... that explains why the... the scorpion was so large." Dumbledore coughed for a few seconds. "Severus, I'm heading back now. I will say... mission successful. I have one."

With a 'rip', Dumbledore portkeyed away.

Hermione and Harry leaned over in their chairs to stare at Dumbledore's portrait. "What?"

"We told you to take backup." Hermione said.

"We told you to leave." Harry added.

Dumbledore shrugged. "We got one. Yes, it cost me my hand and reduced my life expectancy to less than a year, but that was a small price to pay, as far as I was concerned. We recovered one of Tom's Horcruxes. That was enough for me."

In the crowd, Rita Skeeter stood up. "How was that... that thing destroyed?" She asked.

"Fawkes." Hermione replied. "The rebirthing fire of a Phoenix is curious stuff. It's cool enough to not set fire to his perch, but it's devastating against evil. The Horcrux in the ring simply died when hit by Fawkes' regeneration." She sighed. "It's a shame he left after Albus died. He would have been very useful on the hunt."

"A few days later, Dumbledore came to Privet Drive to collect me from my relatives. But, he'd asked me to come with him on a little side-trip to recruit a new teacher." Harry continued. "We already knew that Severus had become the new DADA teacher, something he was nursing wood over."

The portrait of Snape cleared his throat. "I was not 'nursing wood', Potter. I was simply... looking forward to the opportunity."

Harry raised an eyebrow as he craned round to look at the portrait. "Please... I bet the house elves were having to clean your sheets daily."

"I'll never tell." Snape replied, an evil smirk on his face.

Chuckling, Harry turned back to the audience. "Bear in mind, myself and Hermione had been receiving Defence training from Professor Snape on and off ever since Flophart was at Hogwarts, during our

second year. We knew what kind of teacher he was, regardless of what people thought about him."

Hermione glanced over at Ron, who was still fuming. "And yes, Ron, we know you didn't like him, and thought he was a crap teacher. You were wrong."

"There was one other thing that happened, which was important." Harry said. "We all know that Professor Snape killed Professor Dumbledore by AKing him off the Astronomy Tower. What's not commonly known is why Severus did such a thing. And it's basically because of an Unbreakable Vow."

"Bellatrix LeStrange and Narcissa Malfoy went to see Severus early in the summer. Narcissa explained that Voldemort had given Draco a difficult task to prove the value and loyalty of the Malfoy family. His mission was to kill Albus Dumbledore."

"The Ferret was scared, naturally." Hermione continued. "Even with a crippled wand hand, Dumbledore was still more than a match for a sixth year Death Nibbler. He wasn't strong enough to take him on. Narcissa and Bellatrix wanted Severus to support Draco, and if necessary, to complete the mission."

Severus sighed in his portrait. "Unfortunately, I had to accept the Unbreakable Vow, or my usefulness as a spy would come to an end. Fortunately for me, the vow was poorly worded, because there was no time-scale involved. I agreed that if Draco failed his mission, I would complete it. Albus knew of the mission, and supported the effort." He eyed the old man's portrait. "I really wish you hadn't."

Dumbledore shook his head solemnly. "Draco Malfoy, while a spoil, arrogant bully, was not yet a murderer. You knew that my life was over after retrieving the ring. I had nine, ten months left. And you knew I was in pain every day. You did not murder me, my boy. You ended my suffering. For that, I thank you again."

Harry cleared his throat. "So, the following Friday night, myself and Professor Dumbledore went to see Horace Slughorn." Harry eyed the fat man from the stage. "A man with secrets..."

Flashback: On route to Budleigh Babberton, Yorkshire  
Friday, 19th July, 1996

"So, who's this guy again?" Harry asked as he and Dumbledore rematerialised.

"Horace E. F. Slughorn." Dumbledore said as he tucked his wand away. "He was the Potions Master at Hogwarts up until 1981. He'd asked to retire, and Severus had just obtained his Mastery. It seemed to solve two problems in one stroke."

"And we're coming back to collect him... why?"

"Because I can't find anyone else to come and work as the Defence professor, so Severus is going to be taking up that role. Thus, we will need a replacement potions instructor."

"Ah... So, what news about the Ministry?"

Dumbledore glanced around, before pointing to another lane. "Scrimgeour won the election, as I'm sure you read in the Daily Prophet. He, like Cornelius before him, wants you to support his administration."

"I'm sure he does." Harry scoffed. "Has he done anything yet worth my support?"

"In a word, no. At the moment, however, he's trying to pick up the pieces that Fudge left. It will take time for him to make any changes."

"And yet he still wants my support." Harry sneered. "Unlikely."

The two approached a house, spotting the front door, open and the small window smashed. Instead of approaching with caution, they sauntered in, side-by-side. Blood was spattered over the walls, while nearly every piece of furniture had been smashed.

"Hmm..." Dumbledore intoned, looking sharply at Harry, who shrugged.

"I don't know who he thinks he's fooling, sir." Harry replied. "The blood's the wrong colour and smell for human, there's no electronics in the TV, and that chair's breathing."

Dumbledore chuckled. "You forgot the most obvious sign, Harry."

"No I didn't." Harry replied. "The Dark Mark wouldn't necessarily be here. I've found it's only generally sent up when there's been a death, not a kidnapping. After all, they don't always want to tell people about a kidnapping."

"A good point." Dumbledore admitted, sitting down on the breathing chair. "I must say, Horace, you're no more comfortable now than you were twenty years ago."

"A chairmagus?" Harry asked, a chuckle escaping. "That's a new one."

Dumbledore stood, watching the chair shrink into itself before a quivering man appeared, clutching onto a rather portly belly.

"Albus?"

"Good to see you again, Horace." Dumbledore said. "You're looking... well."

It was a slight lie on Dumbledore's part, for the man did not look well at all. Pale and shaking, he clutched onto his wand tightly. "What do you want?"

"You." Dumbledore said bluntly. "I want you to return to Hogwarts and start teaching again."

"And put myself on the front lines?" Slughorn scoffed. "I don't think so, Albus."

Harry shrugged. "Okay, then, Mr. Slughorn. It was nice knowing you. Hope the Death Eaters don't catch you. Come on, sir. We can just get to the pub before closing if we hurry."

Slughorn's complexion paled further as he stared at Harry. "Who are you, boy?"

"Harry Potter. Nice to meet you." Harry said dismissively, before turning back to Dumbledore. "Come on, Professor. The footie's on, and I don't want to miss anymore of the game. Besides, you still owe me a pint." He grinned at Dumbledore. "Alternatively, I could go back and do something rude to Hermione. You know how she makes that weird noise when-"

"Enough, Harry. I've had enough conversations with you about your sex-life to be scarred forever." Dumbledore interrupted, before turning to stare at Slughorn for a moment, then sighing dramatically. "Very well. Good to see you again, Horace. Do take care of yourself. I hope Voldemort's forces don't capture you and kill you."

Walking calmly to the door, Dumbledore stopped at Slughorn's cry of "Wait!" Exchanging a low-five with Harry, Dumbledore turned round.

"Yes, Horace?"

"Y-You... you'll protect me at Hogwarts?"

"Of course."

"And..."

"Look, Mr. Slughorn," Harry said impatiently, "I'm still missing the footie here, so hurry up and make a choice. Come to Hogwarts and teach, protected by the castle walls and the ancient wards, or stay here, be captured by the Death Eaters, then tortured and killed. Your choice. Make it quickly."

"Fine." Slughorn said, mopping his brow. "I shall make my way to Hogwarts, Albus. I'll see you shortly."

"Cool." Harry said. "Come on, Professor. I wanna see West Ham paste Arsenal."

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "I'm sure that Arsenal will put up a valiant struggle, Harry." He followed Harry out of the door, the two men bickering good-naturedly as they walked.

As soon as they heard the 'crack' of apparition, they stopped. "That went very well, Harry." Dumbledore said, chuckling.

"It's a gift." Harry said with mock-arrogance, buffing his finger-nails on his t-shirt. "Besides, I hate footie. Twenty-two grown men chasing a bag of wind about a muddy field? Not my idea of a decent sport."

"Indeed..."

"Slughorn agreed to come to Hogwarts. Afterwards, he told me about his 'collection' of famous people, the infamous 'Slug Club'. I can certainly understand why Albus took me with him. Instead of heading back to my relatives' house, we went to the Burrow, since Molly Weasley had been demanding my removal from the Dursleys, so she could 'take care' of me during my grief."

In the crowd, the matriarch glared balefully at Harry.

"Hermione had already been taken to the Burrow, so that Ron and Ginny could have some company. At least, that's the official story. Unofficially, Hermione was once again subjected to Amortentia-dosing attempts from the Weasleys." Harry told the crowd.

Hermione slowly developed a smirk. "Thanks to my invisibility cloak, I overheard several conversations between Ginny, Molly and Ron. The basic plan was for me to become infatuated with Ron, and become his bitch. I would do his homework for him, and prepare him for the examinations, so that he could get a good job, and I would bear him as many children as my body could carry. After all, as an uppity Mudblood know-it-all, I wasn't worthy of anything else, and I should be grateful that such a strapping, virile pureblood as Ron would be willing to lower himself to be with me."

For the first time in the entire storytelling, Arthur Weasley displayed anger. This anger, however, was directed at his wife and children. He

kept silent, not wanting to air their dirty laundry in public, but knowing that it was coming.

"The plan for Harry was a little different." Hermione said slowly, not bothering to look at the Weasleys. "He was to fall in love with Ginny, signing over all the Potter, and when they found out, the Black wealth, the properties, the stocks... everything was to go to Ginny, before Harry died in battle against Voldemort. If he survived, Ginny would arrange for Harry to be caught cheating on her, so that she could divorce him, making sure that he walked away from the marriage with nothing."

Molly leapt to her feet, ranting silently. She turned and glared at Arthur, who shook his head, before pulling her back into her seat.

"Naturally, this attitude was why we broke with the Weasley family, bar Arthur." Harry said. "However, they all had rather a lot of intelligence about us, and were loyal to Dumbledore."

Said portrait cleared his throat. "Yes... I was made aware of Molly's plans. I was disgusted with them, but I realised that if I or Harry confronted them, it could become a very ugly situation. We decided to keep quiet about the knowledge, but made certain that their plans would never come to fruition."

"So, I was left at the Burrow." Harry said. "I arrived late that evening, eating a bowl of delicious onion soup, laced with Amortentia, naturally. When I woke up the following morning, Ron, Ginny, Hermione, Fleur and Molly came to see me."

Hermione smirked. "It was actually very entertaining to watch Ron turn into a dribbling fool whenever Fleur was around. He couldn't control himself, at all. Not like my Harry."

Harry just shrugged. "The Veela allure doesn't affect me. Never did, really. Not even at the Quidditch World Cup, where there were dozens of them. Two reasons; Occlumency... and Hermione." He reached out and took his wife's hand. "I love my wife deeply. Have done for years. Not even the most potent sexual allure in the world can hold a candle to her."



She blushed prettily, before giving his hand a tender squeeze. "Molly kept arranging situations while we were at the Burrow where me and Ron would be alone, while Harry and Ginny would be together. I'm sure it was her way of making sure that we'd fall madly in love with her offspring. Naturally, it didn't work."

"The next event of note that summer was the OWL results coming through. When Dumbledore dropped me off at the Burrow, he told me that the letters would be received the following morning. At the risk of offending Ron, I was really excited. I wanted to know just how well I'd done. After all, me and Hermione had been cracking the whip for nearly four years of extra work, and we'd been doing really well."

Hermione chuckled. "I remember how nervous I was..."

Flashback: The Burrow, Ottery St. Catchpole, Devonshire  
Saturday, 20th July, 1996

Hermione was sitting in the kitchen with Harry, staring out of the window. She was sipping a cup of tea, while Harry leaned back on his chair, his eyes closed.

"How do you think we did?" She asked softly.

"About the same as the last time you asked me." Harry replied. "And the time before that... and the time before that..."

"Harry..."

"We did fine, Hermione." He reached out and took her hand. "You know that the pair of us kicked arse in our exams. You're fretting about nothing."

She sighed heavily. "You know I worry about exams, Harry."

He squeezed her hand gently. "Unfortunately, I can't use my normal technique of calming you down while we're here."

"I know..." She sighed. "I'm starting to really hate coming here, Harry. Every time I walk into a room, I can feel Ron mentally undressing me. Ginny glares at me like I've walked up to her in the middle of her wedding and pissed on her. Molly seems to be annoyed that I'm not trying to leap into bed with Ron... the twins keep asking me questions about their products... I just... I wanna go home."

"I'm right with you there, Hermione." Harry said softly. "We'll be back at Hogwarts soon enough. Plus, we've got that... event coming up soon."

She broke into a wide grin. "You know, I thought I'd be really nervous about that. I can't wait, though."

"Again, right there with you, Hermione." Harry was about to lean forward for a kiss when he heard Molly starting to descend the stairs. With a speed and grace that was near inhuman, he stood, bolted round the table, and sat down opposite Hermione, so neither of them could be accused of impropriety. Hermione rolled her eyes at him, but said nothing.

"Ah, good morning again, Mrs. Weasley." Harry said brightly.

Molly looked up, a little shocked at hearing Harry. "G-Good morning, Harry dear. You're up early. I thought you were still having your breakfast in bed."

"Professor Dumbledore said that our OWL results would be coming this morning. Both me and Hermione were... eager to find out our results."

Molly nodded. "I suppose I'd better go and make sure that Ron's up, then." She said, turning back and beginning to climb the stairs. She hesitated for a moment, making sure that nothing improper was going on, before she carried on climbing.

"Yeah, I wanna go home." Hermione whispered bitterly. "God damn it, do they think they own us?"

"Hermione." Harry warned. "This house carries sound very well."

"I know." She sighed. "I hate this, Harry. Really hate this."

"Not too long, Hermione. Hang in there." He whispered.

The sound of a battalion of elephants stomping drew their attention, as Ron bolted down the stairs, stopping when he saw Harry and Hermione sitting at the table. His eyes narrowed as he watched them. "What's going on?" He asked, accusation rampant in his voice.

"We're waiting for our OWL results." Hermione replied politely.

"Oh, are they coming today?" Ron asked. "Ah, well. Hermione, do you want to come and play some chess in my room? Got my board all set up."

"I've never liked chess, Ron." Hermione snapped. "You know that." She didn't look at Harry, knowing that Ron was watching the pair of them with an eagle eye. "I just want to sit here and wait for my OWL results."

Ron's eyes narrowed. "Harry, Ginny was in her room, and she said she wanted to speak to you about something."

"Really?" Harry asked. "I didn't hear her."

"She only just told me, mate." Ron said.

"Ah... I'll catch up with her later. Like Hermione, I want to know what my results are."

Ron sat next to Hermione, moving his chair a little too close. "Wouldn't you rather go and wait somewhere else?"

"No. Not really." Harry replied simply, resting his arms behind his head. "I'm quite comfortable here."

Ron growled softly. "Well, I'm sure that what Ginny wanted to speak to you about was important, Harry."

Harry smirked at Ron. "Why don't you just admit that you want to get Hermione in private, in the hopes that your Amortentia will work?"

Ron leapt to his feet, but was too late to avoid the Obliviate from Hermione's wand. "Sit down, Ronald." Hermione said sharply, waiting for Ron to slide limply back into his chair. "You're waiting for the OWL results with Harry and me. We spoke about the battle in the Department of Mysteries. You're very sorry that you weren't more help in that fight. You don't suspect anything is going on between Harry and me."

Harry clicked his fingers in front of Ron's face. "Ron? Ron!" Ron blinked, before shaking his head and staring at Harry.

"Huh?"

"You okay, mate?" Harry asked, faux-concern in his voice. "You blanked out there for a second."

"I'm fine." Ron replied. He thought back. "What were we talking about?"

"OWLs." Harry supplied helpfully.

Hermione went off on one of her exam panic attacks, that Harry knew was false. "I just know I messed up my Ancient Runes exams. I made at least one major mistranslation. And the Defence practical-"

"Shut up!" Ron roared. "You're think you're the only one who's worried about their exams?"

Harry glanced at his fiancée, an eyebrow raised at Ron's sheer audacity and cheek.

"I just know I've failed everything!" Hermione proclaimed dramatically, dropping her head into her hands.

Molly came back down the stairs, Fleur hot on her heels. From his position at the far end of the table, Harry could hear the Weasley matriarch's teeth grinding at the Frenchwoman's antics.

"What happens if we fail everything?" Harry asked.

"We talk it over with Professor McGonagall." Hermione said into the table. "I asked her before we finished term."

"Oh... Wouldn't we just re-sit fifth year? Then take the OWLs again?"

"Possibly." Hermione said. She sighed dramatically. "Where is that blasted owl?"

Fleur was about to speak, when Hermione let out a soft scream, pointing to the window. In the distance, three blobs were approaching the Burrow, growing larger.

"Those are definitely owls." Ron whispered reverently.

"And there's three of them." Harry added.

"One for each of us..." Hermione concluded. She looked at Harry and winked, before letting out a near-sobbing stream of, "oh no... oh no... oh no..."

The owls entered through the open window, soaring round and landing neatly on the table. Harry reached forward and took his envelope, thanking the bird before it flew away. Ron had turned white as he took his, while Hermione snatched the envelope, and ripped it open.

As Harry broke the Ministry seal on the back of the envelope, he felt active magic on the parchment, knowing that it was some kind of glamour charm. So, my results are protected. Excellent... He read through the letter carefully.

Dear Mr. Potter,

The Ordinary Wizarding Level Examinations you have recently taken at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry have now been graded, and this letter is your official notification of your results.

The grading scheme is as follows:

Grade Result

0-20 Troll (T) FAIL

21-40 Dreadful (D) FAIL

41-60 Poor (P) FAIL

61-75 Acceptable (A) PASS

76-90 Exceeds Expectations (E) PASS

91-100 Outstanding (O) PASS

The Ordinary Wizzarding Level Results for Harry James Potter are as follows:

Subject: Percentage Grade Result

Ancient Runes -- -- --

Arithmancy -- -- --

Astronomy 83 Exceeds Expectations 1 OWL

CoMC 79 Exceeds Expectations 1 OWL

Charms 84 Exceeds Expectations 1 OWL

DADA 97 Outstanding 1 OWL

Divination 46 Poor 0 OWL

Herbology 77 Exceeds Expectations 1 OWL

History of Magic 26 Dreadful 0 OWL

Muggle Studies -- -- --

Potions 83 Exceeds Expectations 1 OWL

Transfiguration 88 Exceeds Expectations 1 OWL

Overall Result 74 Acceptable 7/9 OWLs

All examination results were set at this grade, due to interruption in the examination

You have been cleared to take the following NEWT-level Subjects:

NEWT Astronomy

NEWT Care of Magical Creatures

NEWT Charms

NEWT Defence Against the Dark Arts

NEWT Herbology

NEWT Potions

NEWT Transfiguration

Please arrange with your Head of House which subjects you would like to take upon your return to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

If you have any further questions regarding your examination results, please contact Griselda Marchbanks, Head of Department, at the Ministry.

Kind Regards,

Department of Magical Education

## Ministry of Magic

As he finished reading it, he pondered. That's actually not a bad fabrication. It makes me come across as an average student, without seeming thick. I wonder what my real grades are, though? He pressed the parchment against his wrist, where the tip of his wand was resting. In his hands, the glamour on the parchment changed to reveal his real results.

Dear Mr. Potter,

The Ordinary Wizarding Level and Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Level Examinations you have recently taken at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry have now been graded, and this letter is your official notification of your results.

The grading scheme is as follows:

Grade Result

0-20 Troll (T) FAIL

21-40 Dreadful (D) FAIL

41-60 Poor (P) FAIL

61-75 Acceptable (A) PASS

76-90 Exceeds Expectations (E) PASS

91-100 Outstanding (O) PASS

The Ordinary Wizarding Level Results for Harry James Potter are as follows:

Subject: Percentage Grade Result

Ancient Runes 97 Outstanding 1 OWL

Arithmancy 99 Outstanding 1 OWL

Astronomy 83 Exceeds Expectations 1 OWL

CoMC 93 Outstanding 1 OWL

Charms 99 Outstanding 1 OWL

DADA 112 Outstanding 1 OWL

Divination 86 Exceeds Expectations 1 OWL

Herbology 94 Outstanding 1 OWL

History of Magic 78 Exceeds Expectations 1 OWL

Muggle Studies 100 Outstanding 1 OWL

Potions 99 Outstanding 1 OWL

Transfiguration 97 Outstanding 1 OWL

Overall Result 95 Outstanding 12/12 OWLs

All examination results were set at this grade, due to interruption in the examination

Subject: Percentage Grade Result  
Ancient Runes -- -- --  
Arithmancy -- -- --  
Astronomy 91 Outstanding 1 NEWT  
CoMC 96 Outstanding 1 NEWT  
Charms -- -- --  
DADA -- -- --  
Divination -- -- --  
Herbology -- -- --  
History of Magic 91 Outstanding 1 NEWT  
Muggle Studies 100 Outstanding 1 NEWT  
Potions -- -- --  
Transfiguration -- -- --

Overall Result 94.5 Outstanding 4/4 NEWTs

You have been cleared to take the following NEWT-level Subjects:

NEWT Ancient Runes  
NEWT Arithmancy  
NEWT Charms  
NEWT Defence Against the Dark Arts  
NEWT Divination  
NEWT Herbology  
NEWT Potions  
NEWT Transfiguration

Please arrange with your Head of House which subjects you would like to take upon your return to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

If you have any further questions regarding your examination results, please contact Griselda Marchbanks, Head of Department, at the Ministry.

Kind Regards,  
Department of Magical Education  
Ministry of Magic

Wow! I absolutely kicked arse! He thought smugly. Hermione will be so proud of me. He quickly tapped the letter against his wrist, restoring the glamour, before looking up at Ron, who was still fumbling with his letter.

"What did you get, Ron?" Harry asked.



"Er... give me a minute, mate." Ron replied. "What about you?"

Harry passed the parchment over, Ron quickly reading it. For a moment, Harry saw the hint of jealousy in Ron's eyes. "Knew you'd be top at Defence Against the Dark Arts." He finally managed to get in his own envelope. He read through it, his face dropping slightly as he took in his marks.

Without a word, he passed his letter over to Harry.

Dear Mr. Weasley,

The Ordinary Wizarding Level Examinations you have recently taken at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry have now been graded, and this letter is your official notification of your results.

The grading scheme is as follows:

Grade Result

0-20 Troll (T) FAIL

21-40 Dreadful (D) FAIL

41-60 Poor (P) FAIL

61-75 Acceptable (A) PASS

76-90 Exceeds Expectations (E) PASS

91-100 Outstanding (O) PASS

The Ordinary Wizarding Level Results for Ronald Bilius Weasley are as follows:

Subject: Percentage Grade Result

Ancient Runes -- -- --

Arithmancy -- -- --

Astronomy 83 Exceeds Expectations 1 OWL

CoMC 58 Poor 0 OWL

Charms 62 Acceptable 1 OWL

DADA 69 Acceptable 1 OWL

Divination 6 Troll 0 OWL

Herbology 76 Exceeds Expectations 1 OWL

History of Magic 9 Troll 0 OWL

Muggle Studies -- -- --

Potions 35 Dreadful 0 OWL

Transfiguration 52 Poor 0 OWL

Overall Result 64 Acceptable 5/9 OWLs

All examination results were set at this grade, due to interruption in the examination

You have been cleared to take the following NEWT-level Subjects:

NEWT Astronomy

NEWT Charms

NEWT Defence Against the Dark Arts

NEWT Herbology

Please arrange with your Head of House which subjects you would like to take upon your return to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

If you have any further questions regarding your examination results, please contact Griselda Marchbanks, Head of Department, at the Ministry.

Kind Regards,

Department of Magical Education

Ministry of Magic

Harry suppressed a wince as he read the marks. Molly was not going to be happy with these... He passed the parchment back, knowing that it was entirely Ron's fault, considering the prat thought of nothing but food, Quidditch and girls... more specifically, his girl.

Molly took the parchment out of Ron's hands. She quickly read through it. "Well..." She said dangerously. "It's better than Fred and George... I think I'll need to have a word with Minerva when you go back to school."

Ron slumped in his chair. "What about you, Hermione?" He snapped.

"I... not bad." She said softly.

"Come off it!" He snatched Hermione's results away. "Yep... nine 'Outstanding' and one 'Exceeds Expectations' in Defence." He thrust the parchment at Harry, who took it and quickly read it. Her grades on this were good... but like his parchment, there was a glamour in place. He pressed the parchment against the tip of his wand, watching the results change.

Dear Miss Granger,

The Ordinary Wizarding Level and Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Level Examinations you have recently taken at Hogwarts School of

Witchcraft and Wizardry have now been graded, and this letter is your official notification of your results.

The grading scheme for is as follows:

GradeResult

0-20Troll (T)FAIL

21-40Dreadful (D)FAIL

41-60Poor (P)FAIL

61-75Acceptable (A)PASS

76-90Exceeds Expectations (E)PASS

91-100Outstanding (O)PASS

The Ordinary Wizing Level Results for Hermione Jane Granger are as follows:

Subject:PercentageGradeResult

Ancient Runes100Outstanding1 OWL

Arithmancy100Outstanding1 OWL

Astronomy83Exceeds Expectations1 OWL

CoMC97Outstanding1 OWL

Charms100Outstanding1 OWL

DADA94Exceeds Expectations1 OWL

Divination--

Herbology99Outstanding1 OWL

History of Magic91Outstanding1 OWL

Muggle Studies100Outstanding1 OWL

Potions98Outstanding1 OWL

Transfiguration94Outstanding1 OWL

Overall Result96Outstanding11/11 OWLs

The Nastily Exhausting Wizing Level Results for Hermione Jane Granger are as follows:

Subject:PercentageGradeResult

Ancient Runes--

Arithmancy--

Astronomy94Outstanding1 NEWT

CoMC94Outstanding1 NEWT

Charms--

DADA--

Divination--

Herbology--

History of Magic95Outstanding1 NEWT

Muggle Studies100Outstanding1 NEWT

Potions--

Transfiguration--

Overall Result 95.75 Outstanding 4/4 NEWTs

All examination results were set at this grade, due to interruption in the examination

You have been cleared to take the following NEWT-level Subjects:

NEWT Ancient Runes

NEWT Arithmancy

NEWT Charms

NEWT Defence Against the Dark Arts

NEWT Herbology

NEWT Potions

NEWT Transfiguration

Please arrange with your Head of House which subjects you would like to take upon your return to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

If you have any further questions regarding your examination results, please contact Griselda Marchbanks, Head of Department, at the Ministry.

Kind Regards,

Department of Magical Education

Ministry of Magic

"Not bad at all, Hermione." Harry said, passing the parchment back. Hermione quickly took it and read the actual results, smiling at Harry warmly, before folding the parchment and thrusting it into her pocket.

"Any sausages left, Mum?" Ron asked, tucking his results away. "We're NEWT students, now!"

"Me and Hermione absolutely pissed all over our exams. We were exceptionally pleased with our results. Not only had I gained twelve OWLs, but four NEWTs, too! Hermione had eleven, pretty much all with higher grades than me, but she hated, and still hates Divination."

Harry sighed happily as he considered his next words. "My sixteenth birthday was rapidly approaching. This day, normally quite meaningless to me, held a special attraction. I'd proposed to Hermione the previous Christmas, and her parents had agreed to let us be married on my birthday. However, we had a problem: how the devil would we escape from the Burrow and the Weasleys?"

"We had a cunning plan." Hermione said. "All we needed was our time-turners..."

Flashback: The Burrow, Ottery St. Catchpole, Devonshire  
Wednesday, 31st July, 1996

Harry woke up, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. With a spring in his step and a song in his heart, he leapt out of bed, racing into the bathroom for a shower, wash his hair, clean and trim his fingernails... He couldn't keep the immense grin off his face, no matter what he did.

He raced back to his bedroom, spotting a note on his bedside table.

Harry,  
Hi, it's yourself. I'm in our room under my invisibility cloak. You're free to apparate out as soon as you're ready. Knock 'em dead, mate.  
Harry

Closing his eyes, Harry could hear another person breathing. "How did it go?" He called out into the seemingly empty room.

"You know I can't tell you that." Another Harry replied, his temporal doppelganger. "Hurry up, now. You don't want to be late for your own wedding, do you?"

Still with the shit-eating grin, Harry quickly pulled on his tuxedo, pinning a single red rose to his breast. "Are you sure-"

"Yes, I'm sure. Now go. Neither of us wants the Weasleys to spot us. We time-turned at nine o'clock this evening, thirteen hours. My time-frame's Hermione is already in her room. Get going!"

Harry tied his shoes, and stood up. "How do I look?"

"Ravishing." Came the voice again. "Now, go and get yourself married, Harry!"

Running a last check to see he had everything, Harry heard a faint crack.

"That's your Hermione going. Get moving!" The other voice said.

Beginning to disapparate, Harry saw the ripple of air indicative of an invisibility cloak being pulled off, and another Harry Potter appear in his bedroom.

He rematerialised in Hermione's bedroom in Crawley, keeping his eyes shut.

"Hello, handsome." Hermione called out, running a hand over his face. "You look gorgeous in a tux, Harry."

Harry chuckled. "I'd say you look gorgeous too, but I'm not supposed to see you until you're walking down the aisle. However, I know that you'd look gorgeous covered in burlap and dragon shite, so..."

He felt her lips press against hers. "I'm fairly certain there was a compliment in there." She whispered.

"I'm saying you're so ravishingly beautiful, nothing could make you look bad."

Another kiss. "Thank you, Harry." She whispered. "I'm gonna run out, now. Someone should be in to guide you to where you need to go in a minute. I, apparently, need to be hustled away." He heard her moving away, before the door opened and closed. Opening his eyes, Harry sat down on Hermione's bed, smiling widely.

I'm getting married! He thought, chuckling out loud.

The door opened again, revealing a tuxedo-clad Remus Lupin. "Hey, cub."

"Hey, Remus. Wow, looking sharp there... Did Tonks let you out of your bedroom?"

With a blush, Remus nodded. "Yes... we woke up at four, though, so..."

"Ah... you won't fall asleep during the ceremony, will you? Need my best man to stay awake."

"I'll manage." Remus said dryly. "Werewolf stamina, remember?"

"Ah, yes." Harry chuckled, standing up. "So, what's happening now?"

"Dan's driving off with Hermione, Emma's already at the church with Tonks... something to do with flowers and candles, apparently. Severus is downstairs with Minerva, and Albus is registering everything with the Ministry. Fortunately, he's put several powerful protections on the registry, so no-one will be able to know."

"Good." Harry said firmly. "I was wondering about that. How's his hand?"

"Still as it was." Remus sighed. "Anyway, cub, enough about the depressing stuff. Let's get you downstairs so Minerva can cry over you for a few minutes, while me and Severus bask in manly pride, then we can get to the church."

Still chuckling, the two men headed down the stairs, seeing a tuxedo-clad Severus Snape stood there, a proud smile on his face. "Morning, Harry."

"Looking neat, Sev." Harry said. "It always amazes me when I see you out of school robes. You look so... dashing."

Severus looked down, picking an imaginary piece of lint off his shoulder. "Well..."

"And Grantabby, you're looking stunning, too." Harry said, turning to McGonagall, who was wearing a neat tartan suit. "And is that McGonagall family tartan I see?"

"It is." McGonagall confirmed. "You know... officially, I'm no relation of yours, Harry, but I can't help feeling so proud of you. Like my grandson's all grown up."

Wrapping the older woman in a hug, Harry pressed a kiss against her forehead. "You're family, Min. You, Severus, Albus, Remus... now Tonks. All my family. That family's gonna grow today, too."

"Yes... 'tis a pity we're losing Miss Granger from Hogwarts." McGonagall said, sniffing suspiciously. "It's only a shame we can't call her by her proper name while there."

"We'll manage." Harry said, kissing her cheek again. "So, shall we head to the church and see the beauteous woman that I'm going to be fortunate enough to marry?"

The four took hands, and vanished with a 'crack'.

As Harry blinked to get his eyes focussed, the first thing he heard was Emma Granger's traditional 'don't do that!', which was her usual battle-cry whenever people apparated nearby.

He released everyone's hand, looking round the church. An array of floating candles, bundles of flowers everywhere... it was beautiful.

"Emma?" He called out, getting the elder Granger's attention. "It's beautiful. Thank you."

Emma pinked slightly, but came over and wrapped Harry in a tight hug. "It's worth it for you and Hermione, Harry. You've pretty much been my son-in-law ever since that first summer... it's nice to make it official, though."

"Agreed." Harry said. "Thanks for all your hard work."



"My pleasure." Emma leaned closer. "I've had to put six flower arrangements near the back because your friend Tonks fell over on them."

Harry chuckled. "Yeah... plenty of enthusiasm, though."

"That's true." Emma said, pulling back and pressing a kiss onto Harry's cheek. "Thank you, Harry."

"For what?"

"For turning my pretty bookworm daughter into the powerful, assertive, beautiful young woman she's become."

"I owe you my thanks for that. Without Hermione, I'd have been dead a long time ago. My first real friend... my best friend."

"And now, your wife." Emma added. "Knock 'em dead, stud." She stepped back, Tonks bouncing over.

"Wow, Harry. You're looking very buff and manly there." Tonks stumbled into Harry's arms. "Cheers, Harry."

Pressing a kiss to Tonks' cheek, he helped her regain her feet. "Wotcher, Tonks."

"Oi! That's my line." She hugged him tightly, before stepping back. "Officially, I'm Remus' date, and I'm helping to stand in for Sirius."

Harry nodded, a bit sadly. "He's here with us, Tonks." He said, tapping his chest. "Right here. He'll always be with us, as long as we remember him."

At the altar, the ever-imposing figure of Albus Dumbledore stood. "Harry, my boy."

"Good morning, Headmaster." Harry called back. "You look... strange. Can you get away with wearing a dog-collar?"

Albus chuckled. "As part of my authority as the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, I am authorised to act as a Muggle Minister, but only for marriages and funerals. It's a curious little twist, but there we go."

Harry stared at him, before grinning. "It's the only way you could get away with wearing robes, isn't it?"

"Guilty." Dumbledore chuckled. "Yes, as a Minister, I'm authorised to wear robes. Although... black really isn't my colour."

"It's only until the photos, sir." Harry replied. "Then, you can switch to whatever garish and eye-watering robes you'd like."

Dumbledore reached down with his good hand, pulling up the base of his robe, showing off a pair of luminous orange socks. "I've managed to keep a bit of colour, though." He suddenly looked up. "Ah, the warning ward's triggered. Places, everyone."

Harry was unceremoniously pushed to his place on the right-hand side of the altar, Remus taking his place to Harry's right, while Tonks stumbled to the far-left of the altar. Severus, Minerva and Emma took their places in the pews, hankies at the ready.

Dumbledore flicked his wand at the organ, a short wheeze before the bridal march erupted. Harry turned to face the door, the shit-eating grin back on his face. As it opened, he felt himself becoming light-headed.

Sweet Merlin... He thought. She's a goddess! And indeed, she was. Clad in an utterly skin-tight white dress, a six foot train behind her, Hermione stepped into the church. Harry felt his mouth become dry and a pounding start in his head.

"Breathe, cub." Remus whispered.

Harry sucked in a great lungful of air, feeling the pounding recede.

Hermione stepped down the aisle slowly, arm-in-arm with her father. She smiled brightly at Harry, who was still having problems with breathing.

The walk from door to altar took less than a minute, but Harry could have happily sat down and watch her sex-walk her way down the aisle for hours.

Dan and Hermione stood side-by-side near the front of the altar, waiting for Dumbledore to begin.

The aged Supreme Mugwump began. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to celebrate the union of two incredible young people. For five years, I have watched them grow, learn, and become who they are today. They have faced great strife and trouble, but together, have overcome insurmountable odds."

He looked at Dan. "Who gives this witch to this wizard?"

"I, Daniel Marcus Granger, and my wife, Emma Nancy Granger, do."

"Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Granger." Dumbledore said, nodding at Dan, who kissed his daughter's cheek, then stepped back.

"And who gives this wizard to this witch?"

Remus and Tonks stepped forward, while Minerva and Severus stood up. "We do." Remus said. "I, Remus John Lupin, unofficial godfather, Nymphadora Tonks, unofficial sister, Severus Tobias Snape, unofficial uncle and Minerva McGonagall, unofficial grandmother."

"Thank you." Dumbledore said, watching everyone scurry back to positions. "The unions between witch and wizard, man and woman, have been celebrated events throughout the whole of time. We are honoured to be with you both today." Everyone bowed to Harry and Hermione, who blushed. "Harry James Potter... I have known you since you were a mere babe on your mother's knee. I know that she would be honoured and proud of the man that you have become."

"Hermione Jane Granger, I have known you for a much shorter time, but I am privileged to have known you. Your courage, kindness, strength and discipline have helped turn both yourself and your betrothed into remarkable young people."

Hermione's blush escalated, but it would take an AK to remove the smile from her face.

"You have elected to say your own vows to each other." Dumbledore prompted. "Miss Granger, you will go first."

Hermione turned to face Harry, taking his hands in hers. "Harry James Potter... I've known you ever since a bossy little girl burst into your compartment on the Hogwarts Express. Even then, you were devilishly handsome and kind. You saved my life a mere two months later, and from that moment, I was yours. You are my love, my life, my future... everything that I am, I share with you. For eternity."

Harry had to free one of his hands to wipe away a tear, but he grinned at her.

"Mr. Potter, your vows." Dumbledore said, suspiciously misty-eyed himself.

"Hermione Jane Granger... you've always impressed me. Your dedication to learning, to being the best that you can be. When I saved your life, I became yours. My heart, my mind, my body, my soul... all yours. My love, my life, my future... everything that I am, I share with you. For eternity."

There were other suspicious sniffs in the crowd, but neither of the teens noticed them. Their attentions were completely locked on the other.

"The magic that you wield will enforce your vows." Dumbledore said, slipping a damp handkerchief back in his pocket. "Your hands."

Both teens raised up their hands, holding them out to Dumbledore.

"You have shared of yourselves, heart, body, mind and soul. Let your magic guide you." From his wand, a white tendril of magic burst out, wrapping round Harry and Hermione's joined hands. After a moment, the beam split, wrapping itself around their ring fingers, before solidifying into the Potter family wedding bands. Part-showman trick,

part living magic, the spell summoned the family rings from the vault, binding them to the next generation of wearers.

"Your magic has accepted your pledges." Dumbledore intoned happily. "You may bond."

Hermione reached out with her right hand, pressing it against Harry's sternum, while his left pressed against hers. For a moment, there was silence, until both teens began to glow, Harry a bright green, while Hermione glowed a deep purple. The magic trailed down their arms, entering the other, before fading away.

Dumbledore looked ecstatic. "Excellent!" He cheered, before sobering. "Your magic has deemed each other worthy. You will be, from this day, forever linked."

Both teens had goofy smiles on their faces.

"By the authority of the International Confederation of Wizards, the Ministry of Magic of the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland, the Wizengamot, the living magic of the Earth, the Queen of the Realm... I pronounce you husband and wife." Dumbledore grinned. "You may kiss the bride, Mr. Potter."

Harry and Hermione lunged forward, kissing each other greedily.

After clearing his throat for nearly a minute, Dumbledore smiled at the blushing pair. "Ladies and Gentlemen, may I present Mr. Harry James, and Mrs. Hermione Jane... Potter."

The small crowd clapped, Tonks sticking her fingers into her mouth and whistling.

"Photos!" Emma Granger commanded bossily. "Quickly now."

"What's the rush?" Harry asked.

Emma grinned at her new son-in-law. "You want to go and consummate, don't you?"

With a blush, Harry nodded. Emma smirked. "Okay, then. Everyone outside. We'll do the full wedding party, then the Bride and groom, couple of other snaps, then these two can go... bond."

Harry reached into his attaché case, pulling out a photograph. With a flick of his wand, the photo grew until it was metres wide by metres tall. In it, a large crowd of people smiled and waved at the camera.

"I'm still annoyed I wasn't awake for that." Sirius' portrait grouched. "I would have had a few choice words to say."

"Behave, Padfoot." Hermione commanded gently. "You were there in spirit."

Harry pointed to one of the figures in the photo. "Look, look... proof that Severus Snape is not evil. He's standing there in a smart suit, smiling at a wedding. More to the point, at a Potter's wedding."

"It was a beautiful service." Snape said, smiling warmly at Harry. "I enjoyed myself."

Shaking his head, Harry continued. "When I got back from the service and time-turned, Remus turned up in the afternoon, smirking at me."

"You looked knackered, cub." Remus said, the self-same smirk on his face, an almost identical expression on Tonks' face. "Like you'd been shagging all day."

"We had." The Potters said together, returning the smirk with interest. "Of course, we had some bad news. Fortescue had been dragged out of his shop. Dementors were attacking. It was a bad time, and it only promised to get worse."

"We heard about Karkaroff." Hermione said suddenly. "He'd been in an Order safehouse, hiding from the Death Eaters. Unfortunately, the silly bugger went out for a walk. He was captured, tortured and killed. Idiot..."

"During the birthday dinner, Bill Weasley handed me a sack of gold, which he'd gotten out of my vault." Harry said. "I will admit, I was

curious; why would the goblins allow someone else to take money out of my vault? Then I remembered that any member of Gringotts who was caught stealing... well, it wasn't gonna be nice. There was a sealed note inside the bag, hidden from everyone except a Potter, which stated Bill had withdrawn fifty galleons. I checked the bag; there was fifty galleons inside."

"I still remember Ron's face." Hermione said. "His eyes lit up when he thought there was money being passed about. 'Where's mine?'"

"Greedy git..." Harry muttered, before clearing his throat and continuing. "The booklists arrived... that reminds me." He craned upwards in his chair, looking at McGonagall. "Ma'am, why were the booklists always going out on different dates? They were always different."

McGonagall nodded. "Since we had such a difficult time getting teachers, Defence mainly, we had to wait until we had a teacher, and they had lesson plans prepared, so we knew which book to put on the list."

"Ah. Makes sense." Harry agreed. "In my letter, it announced that I'd been made the Quidditch captain. Again, the jealousy of Ron Weasley made an appearance as he glared holes in my back." Harry looked back at McGonagall. "Actually, another question; how was Ron able to keep his prefect position? As I understand it, if a student fails two core classes, they're automatically removed, and the badge reassigned."

"Molly." McGonagall said simply. "She approached Albus, and told him that if her son didn't keep his prefect position, she would make Arthur remove the support of the Weasleys from the Order. She also demanded that he be made Quidditch captain, but you and Katie were senior team members, and Katie was busy with her NEWTs, so it went to you."

"Ah." Harry shrugged, before continuing with the story. "Now that we had our booklists, we could head to Diagon Alley to do our shopping, and of course, see the twins' new shop."

"Hang on." Hermione interrupted. "Before that, I was sneaking about the Burrow under my invisibility cloak. I overheard a fascinating conversation between Ron and Molly. Molly was complaining about Ron's poor results, while Ron was complaining that Harry had been made the Quidditch captain..."

Flashback: The Burrow, Ottery St. Catchpole, Devonshire  
Monday, 5th August, 1996

Hermione had followed Ron as he stomped into his mother's bedroom, where the Weasley matriarch was putting away linens.

"Mum..." Ron whined. "I thought you'd spoken to McGonagall."

Molly turned round, quickly closing the door. "I did. I managed to keep your prefectship, even though according to the rules, you shouldn't have kept it. I even managed to get you into her Transfiguration class, although you'll have to work hard on that."

"I don't care about that!" Ron snapped. "I wanted to be Quidditch captain. It's not fair that Potter's got it. He always gets everything!"

Molly pulled Ron into a tight hug. "I know, Ronnie, I know. She said that Potter was next in line for the position."

Ron pulled back sulkily. "He always gets everything... rich, famous... he got a Firebolt in third year! It's not fair! He doesn't deserve it!"

"Shh, shh..." Molly held up her hands. "It's okay, Ronnie. When Ginny snags him, she'll be able to persuade him to give up the captaincy to you. He'll be so busy doing whatever she wants, he won't be able to captain the team. You'll be able to take the position then. When she gets hold of his vaults, we'll be able to buy you the best broomstick on the market. Don't forget, you'll be able to get the Mudblood to do your work for you. Don't worry, Ronnie, Mummy'll fix it."



Harry and Hermione began sniggering. "It was funny." Hermione said through her laughter. "Poor 'ickle Ronnie needed his Mummy to reassure him."

"I still haven't forgiven him for the 'Mudblood' comments." Harry said icily. "Disrespecting my fiancée and wife... I nearly ripped his liver out through his nostrils right then." He glared at Ron, before turning his attention back to the audience. "So, we went to Diagon Alley to pick up our school supplies. Bill had already gotten me some money from my vault, but I knew I had other business to take care of in Gringotts..."

Flashback: Gringotts Bank, Diagon Alley, London  
Saturday, 10th August, 1996

Harry discretely stepped away from the Weasleys outside Flourish and Blotts, near-running into Gringotts. Fortunately, he didn't need to join the immense queues to access his money. Instead, he headed towards the bank of offices along the far wall, opening the door marked 'Snaptick - Inheritances'. He poked his head in the office, nodding when Snaptick gestured him in.

"Greetings, honoured goblin." Harry said in flawless Gobbledygook. "May your endeavours bring you wealth and honour."

Snaptick let out an evil smile. "You speak our language flawlessly, Lord Potter. You even used the right greeting. I am honoured by your courtesy."

Harry raised an eyebrow. The goblin hadn't returned the ritual greeting. "I see, Snaptick. You may be honoured by my courtesy, but you have not honoured me by returning my greeting."

The goblin's face fell. "My apologies, Lord Potter. I did not mean to cause offence."

"And yet, accidental offence occurs alarmingly often." Harry replied, remembering the conversation between Dumbledore and his relatives when they'd left Privet Drive.

"May the blood of your ancestors sing your praises of wealth and honour, Lord Potter." Snaptick replied in Gobbledygook. "And again, I apologise for my error."

Harry waved it off. "I'm sure you can understand my... hesitation in dealing with Gringotts if such a thing as common courtesy isn't followed."

Snaptick was now crapping razor blades. If he lost the Potter account...

"Now, Snaptick, I would like to cover the basics quickly." Harry said brusquely. "I have other things to be doing today. Possibly looking into alternative banking. If we could cover everything quickly?"

Still evacuating breeze blocks, Snaptick nodded jerkily. "O-Of course, Lord Potter. As you're no doubt aware, the will of Sirius Orion Black has now been read. As everything was left to yourself, your Headmaster informed us that he would pass the message on to you."

"He did." Harry replied in a bored tone. "I have inherited the Black family estate, primarily cash and one property."

"Correct." Snaptick replied nervously. "However, the house is under an enchantment, rendering it impossible for us to record the name, or even speak it."

"I am aware of the property." Harry said. "I am aware that I have inherited the hovel."

Snaptick nodded, pulling out another piece of parchment. "There is also the vault. The Black Family liquid assets were in the region of G800,000, which is currently stored in vault #713. What would you like the disposition of these funds to be?"

Harry pondered for a moment. "As I understand it, Snaptick, the Potter Family liquid assets are stored in one of the low-numbered vaults, am I correct?"

"You are, sir."

"Then please move the funds from vault #713 to vault... what was the number of my family vault?"

"#16." Snaptick advised. "You also have your trust vault, #687, which contains approximately G46,000, with only minimal purchases, notably a broomstick and an invisibility cloak four years ago, and your routine living expenses and school shopping. You also have a vault that was set up by Lord Dumbledore in early 1982, #1194, which has been receiving small deposits of cash and other items since that time."

Harry nodded absently, then held up his hand. "What about deposits from the Weasley twins?"

"I was coming to that, sir." Snaptick said, a bit of heat in his voice, which vanished when Harry glared at him. "My apologies, sir. You have received approximately G5,000 during the last two months in net profit. The contract you created between yourselves and the Weasley twins has been recorded here, and the funds distributed accordingly."

"Excellent." Harry said, still sounding bored. "I assume that you're aware of my marriage?"

"We are, sir." Snaptick nodded. "Mrs. Hermione Jane Potter nee Granger has not yet been authorised to access any of your vaults."

"Why?"

"Pureblood law, Lord Potter." Snaptick sounded even more nervous. "As the Lady Potter is a Muggleborn witch, it is necessary for you to authorise her to access your vaults and accounts."

Harry sighed. "Fine. Lady Hermione Jane Potter is authorised to access vaults #687 and #1194. Upon my seventeenth birthday, she will also be allowed to access vault #16." Snaptick nodded. "Out of idle curiosity, what is the balance of vault #16?"

Snaptick scrabbled for another piece of parchment. "At last tally, which was in 1981, the balance was G1,203,158. There have been no transactions since that date, so that balance stands."

Again, Harry nodded casually. The whole shebang comes to a hundred million pounds, plus change... Not a bad little nest egg. "I see. Do I need to sign for the inheritance?"

Yet another sheet of parchment and a blood quill was passed to Harry. "Joy..." He sighed. He quickly read through the legalese, stopping when he came to the 'chattel' section. "Wait a minute... is this a licence?"

"Yes, sir." Snaptick grovelled. "House elves, when passed on from one owner to another, need to be licensed. Your elf 'Kreacher' is now recorded as being your property."

Oh, joy... Harry sighed, signing his name on the parchment, wincing when the quill cut into the back of his hand. Once signed, he passed the parchment and quill back. "Is there anything else?"

"Not at the moment, Lord Potter." Snaptick said, then took a chance. "I do apologise for my lack of manners, Lord Potter."

"Okay." Harry said dismissively. He had no intention of moving his money from Gringotts, although it never hurt to remind them that without the wizards as customers, they'd have no business. He stood, turning around and walking out. The insult of showing your back to a goblin was quite severe, but Harry knew that Snaptick wouldn't take the insult. He was right.

"So..." Harry cleared his throat. "Hermione now had access to my vaults and possessions." He glanced over at Ginny Weasley, who was red and fuming. "Unfortunately, it means that the Weasleys will never get it." He sighed. "It's so very sad..."

Hermione, on the other hand, was smirking evilly at Ron, who'd turned puce. Thanks to her abilities at Legilimency, she could pluck every thought from his vacant little mind. She leaned closer to her husband. "Ron's still planning on how he can 'win me' from you. Ginny's... well, she's pissed."

Harry just shrugged, then continued with the tale. "So, while shopping in Diagon Alley, we saw Draco Malfoy in Madam Malkin's. He refused to let anyone touch his left forearm... something I found very curious, considering he was a mere sixteen years old. Hermione's first instinct was 'he's too young', but when we magically scanned him, we saw a perverted protean charm on his arm. He had the Dark Mark. When we saw him going into Borgin and Burkes, Hermione went in afterwards."

"Unfortunately," Hermione sighed, "I'm absolutely pants at telling fibs. Borgin knew instantly that I was lying, and I had to flee." She turned to Ron. "And yes, I know what you're thinking, Ron. You're thinking that I didn't believe that Malfoy was a Death Eater. I didn't have to 'believe' anything, I could sense the Dark Mark on his arm, just like Harry could."

"We knew the ferret was up to something." Harry continued. "People like him don't suddenly change everything about themselves. Especially considering that he dropped his prefect position, but that's something we'll come to later."

The portrait of Snape cleared his throat, prompting Harry to turn round. "Ah, yes." He glanced over at Ron. "You thought that Snape was trying to help Malfoy kill Dumbledore, didn't you?"

"I'd rather have killed Malfoy." Snape said bluntly. "The little globule of tuberculous sputum pranced around the school, thinking he was king of the hill, just 'cause he'd enslaved himself to a despotic monster."

"You've been watching Red Dwarf again, haven't you?" Harry asked.

Snape's portrait blushed slightly. "Just a little. They have some of the best insults there, and you need those when dealing with Death Eaters, Harry. You know that."

Harry chuckled, before turning back. "So, myself and Hermione spent the rest of the holidays at the Burrow, with the Weasleys constantly trying to separate us and flirting, or rather, what they thought was flirting, with us both. Every day... every bloody day, our Amortentia detectors went off, letting us know that they were still trying it."

Taking another drink of his Butterbeer, Harry looked around the Great Hall. "Anyone have any questions so far?"

Several people stood up. Harry pointed to the first, Arthur Weasley. "Could I clarify something, Harry?"

"Shoot."

"You're saying that for the best part of five years, my wife, sons and daughter were attempting to ensnare both you and Hermione using controlled substances."

"We are, sir. I'm sorry." Harry said apologetically.

"Do not apologise!" Arthur snapped dangerous. "You are not at fault. On behalf of the Weasley family, I feel I must apologise to you both, on several counts. First for them doing it. Second for not spotting it." Arthur bowed slightly to Harry and Hermione, prompting Molly to gnash her teeth at her husband.

"No problem, Mr. Weasley." Hermione said for both of them. "We know that you are not at fault, sir. That blame can be squarely laid on your lady wife."

Arthur sat down. Harry and Hermione turned their attention onto the next questioner: Percy Weasley. With simultaneous groans, they prompted him to continue.

"You're telling us that you were aware that one of the students had become a Death Eater, and you didn't report it to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement?"

"No." Harry replied. "We informed Headmaster Dumbledore, in his positions as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot and as Headmaster of the School. While having the Dark Mark is a crime, it only results in a fine and monitoring."

"I know this!" Percy hissed. "Why didn't he inform the authorities?"

"What was the point?" Dumbledore's portrait called out. "He had no access to the Malfoy family vaults, so he couldn't pay the fine, and we monitored him closely. There was no point in doing anything more."

Percy grunted and sat down, leaving one more person with a question.

"Minister Shacklebolt?"

Kingsley smiled at Harry. "Will you be bringing these people up on charges, Harry?"

"Haven't decided yet, Shack." Harry replied casually, glaring at Percy who was climbing to his feet at the disrespect shown to the Minister. The glare promptly made him sit back down. "Still more of our fascinating tale to come."

Hermione cleared her throat. "Yes... the rest of the summer passed fairly routinely. We resisted the poisoning attempts, while we carried on with our reading. Molly invited Harry to spend Christmas at the Burrow, but I wasn't invited. Since Harry was the rich one, they wanted a chance to get him without me being around to block it."

"Naturally, I didn't want to spend time without my beautiful wife." Harry said. "But, we agreed that resisting would again lead to questions that we didn't want to answer, so we agreed that I'd go and stay at the Burrow, using my communicator to Portkey across to Hermione's for..."

"Relaxation and comfort." Hermione said with a dirty grin. "But that's an entirely different story. Also, before the end of August, Remus told us that he'd be spending time with the werewolves, trying to get them to turn away from Voldemort. Since we had our watches, we'd be able to talk at any time, and he'd be able to keep in touch with Tonks."

Molly lurched to her feet, ranting silently. Arthur sighed, flicking his wand, so the silencing charm was released. "Are you saying that Tonks was with Remus all that time?"

"Yes." Harry said. "They started dating during..." He turned to the communication mirror. "What was it, September, October?"

"About that." Tonks said, glancing at Remus.

"Our first date was on September 28th, Harry." Remus said fondly. "And that resulted in Tonks dragging me back to her flat for a nightcap."

"Which lasted three days." Tonks said with a dreamy sigh. "Gotta love the stamina of a werewolf."

Both Harry and Hermione wrinkled their noses at that. "Anyway... Back to school. We rode the Express to Hogwarts, Ron and Hermione heading to the prefect meeting. When they came back, I found out that Malfoy wasn't a prefect anymore..."

Flashback: Hogwarts Express, Passing through Canterbury  
Sunday, 1st September, 1996

Ron and Hermione came back into the compartment, Hermione's eyes lit up with annoyance at Ron. Then again, it was always easy to tell when Hermione was annoyed with Ron: she was awake. He just had that effect.

"So, how'd it go?" Harry asked, shuffling closer to the window so Hermione could squeeze in next to him, conveniently providing a buffer against Ginny when she came back from seeing her friends.



"Malfoy's not doing prefect duty. He's just sitting in his compartment with the other Slytherins, we saw him when we passed." Hermione reported, sitting next to Harry. He sat up straighter.

"That's curious... it's not like him to turn down the opportunity to show off how much better he is than everyone." He looked at his wife, who shrugged.

"Maybe he thought being a prefect was too tame after being an IS member last year." She offered.

"Maybe..." Harry was dubious. "Did he say anything when you passed?"

"Just the usual." Hermione replied. "Called Ron a poor blood traitor, and me a Mudblood whore." She saw Harry's eyes narrow slightly. "Oh, leave him, Harry. Little shit's worthless. You know that."

He leaned in closer to whisper in her ear. "He'll pay for that, wife. You know I won't let it go."

She sighed and nodded. "Fine."

A knock on the door revealed a timid third year. "I-I've been ordered to give this to you, Mr. P-Potter." The terrified girl passed a note to Harry, with another for Neville, then fled.

Harry read the note. "Ah, Professor Slughorn wants me to join him for lunch."

Neville looked up. "Me, too. Who is he?"

"A collector, Neville." Hermione said, reading the note. "He's one of those people who ride coat-tails." Hermione gave a very 'significant look' at Ron as she said this. "Are you gonna go?"

"Don't wanna." Harry groaned petulantly. "But, I suppose I should play nice, really. I'll see if I can listen in to Malfoy on the way."

After passing Malfoy's compartment, and hearing a fascinating debate about who was more attractive, Celestina Warbeck or Gwenog Jones, with a witty repartee about breast size, Harry and Neville entered Slughorn's compartment.

"Harry, m'boy!" Slughorn boomed. "Good to see you! Good to see you, and you must be Mr. Longbottom." He held out his hand to Neville, who shook it nervously. Harry could tell that Neville felt the overwhelming urge to count his fingers afterwards. He didn't blame him. Slughorn just oozed insincerity.

Slughorn introduced the other occupants of the compartment, making Harry roll his eyes at the younger generation of the rich and famous. To Harry's unpleasant surprise, Ginny was there after impressing Slughorn by hexing someone.

Harry watched as Slughorn schmoozed with people, dismissing Marcus Belby when he found out that he wasn't on the 'in' with his rich and famous Uncle.

"And now, Harry... I really don't know where to start with you." Slughorn boomed again. "We barely scratched the surface over the summer."

That's because I don't like you. Harry thought, inclining his head slightly in response.

"I hear they're calling you 'the Chosen One' now..." Slughorn said, letting the sentence trail off, prompting Harry to complete it for him.

Harry shrugged. "Depends on what you mean by 'chosen', Professor. I was 'chosen' to be Quidditch captain. I was 'chosen' to be the youngest player in a century. I wasn't 'chosen' to be a prefect. Is there something specific you wish to know?"

Slughorn blustered for a moment. "Of course, there've been rumours for years about you, m'boy. You survived You-Know-Who... the word was that you have extraordinary powers..."

"Don't put stock in rumours, Professor." Harry replied bluntly.

"Then the end of the last school year. The Prophet's been known to make mistakes... print inaccuracies, but given the number of witnesses, there was quite a disturbance at the Ministry, and you were in the thick of it."

"I was there." Harry said shortly.

"So modest." Slughorn simpered. "The rest of the stories... this fabled prophecy, for instance-"

"We never heard a prophecy." Neville spoke up.

"That's right." Ginny added. "We were there, too, and we didn't hear a blessed thing. All this 'Chosen One' rubbish is nothing but more Prophet propaganda."

No, for once, the Prophet's absolutely right. Harry thought. Still, not gonna tell you lot about it. He noticed the Slytherins staring at him hungrily, hoping for information that they could pass to their master.

"For the last year, Professor, the Prophet's printed lies and speculation about me." Harry replied. "I don't even bother with it anymore, since we've never run out of toilet roll at Hogwarts. Was that all you wanted, Professor? A chance to confirm the rumours?"

"Not at all, Harry m'boy." Slughorn back-pedalled. "I just wanted to meet you. Get to know you."

"Well... now you have." Harry said, standing up. "If there's nothing else, Professor, I'll be returning to my compartment now. Thank you for the invitation." Neville stood up, Ginny sulkily following suit.

"Now, Harry, there's no need-"

"Good afternoon, Professor. I'll see you in class." Harry strode out of the door, Neville and Ginny falling in behind him.

Once back in the compartment, Harry told Hermione the story, practically ignoring Ron's contributions to the conversation.

"...and I still didn't get a chance to listen in to Malfoy." He concluded in a whisper. "But, I had a cunning plan."

Hermione nodded. "Which is?"

"The model." Harry replied, reaching into his trunk and pulling out the model Firebolt he'd received from Tonks the previous Christmas. "If I use this and the model of me with a recording charm, then it can listen in to Malfoy's conversations, record them, and then play them back to us."

Hermione nodded again, pulling the lid of the trunk up to hide his actions, before tapping the model Harry with a disillusionment charm, then the model Firebolt. She glanced around the compartment, deciding to cast a small Obliviate once the work was done. "Go and follow Draco Malfoy." She instructed the toy. "Stay with him at all times, but do not let yourself be caught."

The model saluted Hermione, barely visible thanks to the charm, mounted the broom, and took off, soaring out of the door. "That thing is so cool." Hermione whispered, before her wand flashed, the memory charm knocking off the last thirty seconds.

Hermione cleared her throat. "So, we had a way of monitoring Malfoy at all times. Whenever he was in class, the doll could report to Professor McGonagall or Professor Dumbledore and have it's memory recorded, so we could find out what the little shite was up to and take steps. That evening, when we got to school and finished the feast, we went to see the Headmaster..."

Flashback: Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Sunday, 1st September, 1996

"Ah, good evening, Harry and Hermione." Dumbledore said cheerily. "Lemon drop?"

Harry took three from the bowl, winking rakishly at Dumbledore as he popped the first into his mouth. Hermione reached forward and took a couple, conveniently ignoring her parents' demands to avoid sweets.

"Now, what do we have to discuss this evening?" Dumbledore asked. Behind him, Snape and McGonagall settled into squishy chintz armchairs.

"Draco Lucius Malfoy." Harry said, leaning back in his chair. "He's on a mission, sir. I believe that he's taken his Dark Mark."

Dumbledore looked at Snape, who nodded slightly, before looking back at Harry. "You are correct, Harry. He does indeed bear the Dark Mark, as do his companions, Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle. The wards reported it to us earlier today."

"There's something else." Snape said slowly. "Draco's been given an assignment. He's been ordered to kill Headmaster Dumbledore by the end of the school year."

Harry whistled through his teeth. "Optimistic, isn't it?" He pondered. "That's what your meeting was about between the Black sisters, wasn't it?"

"Yes." Snape sighed. "Albus ordered me to agree to their oath, with one exception. I didn't have a timescale attached. I will have to kill Albus Dumbledore, unless I can put it off until he dies of natural causes."

Hermione's eyebrow shot up. "You're playing Russian Roulette, sir. I hope it doesn't backfire on you."

"As do I." Snape whispered, before he looked at Harry. "How did you know that Malfoy's been given a task?"

Harry reached into his pocket, pulling out the 12" doll of himself. "I sent this, disillusioned, into Malfoy's compartment on the Express on

the model Firebolt. He's got a recording charm on him, too. I listened to it during dinner." He tapped his wand against the model's head, prompting Malfoy's voice to come spewing out.

"...he doesn't care if I'm qualified. Maybe the job he wants me to do isn't something that you need to be qualified for."

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes... I believe Tom is just arrogant enough to believe that an underage, extremely average wizard would be able to defeat me." He sighed. "Of course, I was well aware of this, but Mr. Malfoy's arrogance is... disturbing."

"Yeah..." Harry agreed. "It means he won't hesitate to throw everything he's got at you, sir, and he won't bother to worry about innocent bystanders. He's become the second most dangerous thing he can be; someone who just doesn't care."

Hermione frowned, before her eyes widened in realisation. "He could become the most dangerous if we're not careful, Harry. A wounded animal. I honestly don't think there's anything he cares about."

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Indeed. We shall watch over him."

"As shall we." Harry said, gesturing to himself and Hermione. "The doll can hover around him all the time, staying disillusioned, and come and report to us if there's anything we need to know."

"A sound idea." Dumbledore said, inclining his head at Harry. "There is one other thing that we need to discuss, Harry. Severus has reported that Voldemort's ordered all his forces to monitor you, in an attempt to learn your habits and weaknesses. I believe that if they were to discover the extent of your real relationship with Miss Granger, she will be targeted."

"And your suggestion?" Harry asked neutrally.

Dumbledore glanced at his fellow teachers, before spearing Harry with a gaze. "I would like you to repeat your actions from fourth year. As you are aware, I have no problems with your marriage to Mrs. Potter. I believe that you complete each other. But at the present time,

I believe a slightly rockier relationship between Mr. Potter and Miss Granger would be beneficial."

Hermione shrugged. "We've been hiding who and what we are for the last five years, Headmaster. It's not a stretch to do it now. As long as we can happily share our bunk as we have previously, then I don't have a problem with it." She turned to Harry. "Maybe we could stage some public arguments."

His eyebrow shot up. "And why would we do that?" A slow smile spread over his face. "Hmm, although, I can see the benefits. Just because they're not real arguments doesn't mean we can't have a lot of angry make-up sex and I don't believe I just said that out loud." He blushed before looking at the three teachers, all of whom were looking up at the ceiling and humming lightly.

"That's a very good point, Harry." Hermione said evilly, smirking at her husband. "I'm certain we'll be able to explore that option thoroughly." She glanced over at the professors. "I believe we've finished discussing our sex-life, Professors."

Dumbledore looked down, his eyes twinkling. "Hmm? So sorry, I think we went temporarily deaf there. I do hope you'll recall the warning I gave you with regards to your time turners; you must not be seen. Apart from that, tell us nothing. If we don't know, we can't stop you."

"Of course, sir." Hermione said primly.

With a final 'hmm', Dumbledore changed the subject. "Now, with regards to your training, I have decided to offer you some private tutoring with myself this year. Instead of the standard curriculum subjects you've been taking, I intend to show you all of the many dirty duelling tricks I've learned in my rather long life. I also intend to show you the history of Tom Riddle, so that we can continue searching for his blasted Horcruxes. Each week, I shall assign you a spell, and I would like you to find the information about that spell and learn how to cast it."

Harry nodded. "That makes sense, sir. I think the memories will be very useful."

Snape cleared his throat. "I have something for the pair of you as well." He reached into the small haversack between his feet, pulling out a battered copy of an old potions book. "This was my textbook when I was at school, which, conveniently, is the current one assigned by Horace. I've made a few modifications over the years, and I believe that these will be of use to you. There's also a few spells of my own creation inside. Be careful when using these. Some of them are... less than pleasant."

Hermione leaned forward and took the book, flicking through idly. She read several of the modifications, before looking up at Snape with a thunderous expression. "You'd better have a damned good explanation for this." She hissed.

Snape's eyebrow shot up, and the corners of his lips twitched. "Whatever do you mean, Mrs. Potter? And I would remind you, you're speaking to a Professor."

"You... you... you man, you! You've modified all these potions, and you haven't told the authorities? Why the bloody hell not?"

"I didn't see the point." Snape replied, amused. "Besides, it's better to keep some information in reserve, Hermione. You know that as well as I do. Not everything should be shared."

She huffed for a few moments. "But some of these are... Sir, these are brilliant. Why not share them?"

Snape shrugged slightly. "Because, if it was known just how good some of these modifications are, the pair of us who worked on them, which was both myself and Lily, would have been co-opted to modify other potions. Naturally, we didn't want this to happen. So, we kept our research secret."

Hermione sighed, unhappy with the answer, but knowing that it was truth. "I understand, sir. I don't like it, but I understand." She passed the book to Harry. "We'll copy these modifications into our own books, and pass this back, sir."



"I'd appreciate that." Snape said thankfully.

"What's a 'Half-Blood Prince'?" Harry asked.

"That was my self-appointed nickname when I attended school." Snape replied. "My father was Tobias Snape, a Muggle, while my mother, a pureblood witch named Eileen Prince. So, I was a half-blood Prince."

Harry stared at him. "That's mighty thin, sir."

"My father was a misogynistic hateful prick." Snape snorted disdainfully. "I'd rather have had my mother's name. But still, me and Lily worked together. To be honest, I think I prefer 'the Batman' as a nickname."

"Is there anything else you wish to discuss this evening?" Dumbledore asked.

"No, sir." Harry and Hermione intoned in unison.

"Then we shall conclude for the evening. Our first lesson shall be on Saturday evening, at 8pm. We shall start witness the memories of Tom Riddle then. Dismissed."

Harry leaned back in his chair, taking another drink of his Butterbeer. "Myself and Hermione gained our potions grade of 'Outstanding', so naturally, we were in potions. Ron's 'Dreadful' means that he wasn't qualified, but again, thanks to Molly's interference and threats, he was included in the class. Personally, I think it's because she needed him to learn how to brew certain potions that would help him later in life."

Hermione coughed 'Amortentia', but other than that, she didn't comment on Ron's potions capability. "So, during that first lesson, me and Harry used Severus' potions book, and we both got perfect potions. We won the little bottle of Felix between us, but since we'd read ahead, we knew just how dangerous the stuff could be."

"And you threatened to remove Snape's manhood again because he wasn't sharing his notes with the world." Harry pointed out with a grin.

"They're good work!" Hermione protested instantly. "I mean... his research is truly outstanding."

Percy Weasley stood up again. "Could you clarify, Mr. Potter?"

"No." Harry snapped. "The book was his personal possession, and was destroyed later that year. Both myself and Hermione have copies of his potions notes, but we were instructed not to share them with anyone. I'm afraid the Ministry will have to do without them."

"Mr. Potter, the Ministry has a right-"

"Silence." Hermione ordered harshly. "We've given you your answer, Minion Weasley. Those notes are ours, and have been secured properly." She watched as Percy scribbled down more notes, and leaned closer to her husband. "He's planning on confiscating everything from us, Harry. Every coin, note, book and possession we have." Her eyebrow shot up. "And even from my parents, just in case we left anything with them."

Harry nodded, before looking at Percy. "Minion Weasley, what are you writing down?"

Percy looked up. "I'm just making notes." He said airily.

"About a list of crimes that you plan to try and pin on us, correct?" Harry asked.

"You have broken the law, Mr. Potter. You have admitted it yourself." Percy looked down at his notes. "The list of charges that will be drawn up, and I have no choice in that, since I am a Ministry official and have heard your admissions, will be extensive and will be issued shortly." He sneered at them. "However, please continue your story. I'm sure there's more evidence."

He was shocked when Harry and Hermione both chuckled, before Harry picked up the notebook from his lap. "You know... you're shit

out of look, Weatherby. But, we'll come to that later." He dropped the book back into his lap, before continuing the story.

"Where was I? Ah, yes. Potions lessons during the first day. Well, after that, we carried on. Best of all, we had Severus Snape teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts. I can remember some of the things that I overheard about him. Stating that he was secretly plotting against Dumbledore. He was trying to get the students trained as junior Death Eaters... what utter bollocks."

Ron was again mouthing something, but Harry didn't bother to release him from the silencing charm. "One thing I'll always remember about Severus Snape's first lectures is the passion he puts into it. When he stomped into the dungeon on that first day of class, and told us about potions..." Harry turned to the portrait. "What was it you said?"

Snape cleared his throat and smiled. "'There will be no foolish wand-waving in this class. As such, I don't expect many of you to appreciate the subtle science and exact art that is potion making, or even to recognise it as magic at all. However... for those with the... disposition... I can teach you how to ensnare the senses and bewitch the mind. I can teach you how to brew glory, bottle fame, and even put a stopper... in death.'"

Harry nodded. "Your delivery of that speech is absolutely brilliant. It gave me goosebumps."

"Thank you." Snape replied politely.

"And your speech for DADA?"

Again, Snape cleared his throat. "'The Dark Arts are many, varied, ever-changing and eternal. Fighting them is like fighting a many-headed monster, which, each time a neck is severed, sprouts a head even fiercer and cleverer than before. You are fighting that which is unfixed, mutating, indestructible. Your defences must therefore be as flexible and inventive as the arts you seek to undo.'"

"And he was spot-on accurate." Hermione said. "And I agree with Harry. When you delivered that speech... I got shivers down my spine."

"I must admit, I may be a... strict teacher, but I am a teacher." Snape preened. "I took my job seriously."

"And did very well." Harry concluded, smiling at Snape. "So, we were learning more and more, and we had our second true expert teaching us DADA, after Remus left."

"Then," Hermione spoke up, "we had our first lesson with Professor Dumbledore. It wasn't quite what we expected, to be honest..."

Flashback: Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Saturday, 7th September, 1996

"Ah, good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Potter!" Dumbledore called up jovially. "It's wonderful to see you! Please, come in, come in."

Harry and Hermione shuffled into Dumbledore's office, gently sitting down in front of the old man's desk.

"Cup of tea? Lemon drop?" Dumbledore offered. "Cup of tea and a lemon drop?"

"Thank you, sir." They replied in unison. After the refreshments were served, they cut to the chase. "So, sir, what are we going to be learning?"

Dumbledore gestured to the Pensieve lying on the desk. "I thought we'd begin with what we know about Tom Riddle's transformation into Lord Voldemort." He said. "I've managed to track down a number of memories regarding his early years. While this information is not vital to the war effort, I believe that this knowledge can only be beneficial to you."

Hermione was thinking. "Do you have information about the physical transformation into Voldemort, sir?"

"Partially." Dumbledore replied. "I have memories of various people who interacted with him, both earlier in his life... and later. Minerva went to school with him, a couple of years behind him. She had passed on everything she knew, but unfortunately, that information is limited."

"Yeah..." Harry replied. "If someone asked me about... about Marietta Edgecombe, I couldn't tell you squat about her, and she's only one year ahead of us. You've been a teacher here for a long time, haven't you, Albus?"

"Indeed." Dumbledore agreed. "In fact, I was the one who went to collect young Tom Riddle, all those years ago. However, we will be going back a little further in our recollections. This first memory," He picked up a glowing bottle, "is from a member of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, named Bob Ogden..."

Almost a half hour later, the three reappeared from the Pensieve, spotting Severus Snape idly lounging on the sofa underneath the window. "Ah, good evening."

"Good evening, Severus. Have you been waiting long?" Dumbledore asked.

"Not too long, no. Which one was that?"

"Bob Ogden." Harry said, deep in thought. "That's interesting, sir. I'm making assumptions here, but I believe them to be accurate. The 'handsome squire' was Voldemort's daddy, which means that Merope was Voldemort's mum."

"Correct." Dumbledore said, a ghost of a smile on his face. "The elder Gaunt was called Marvolo."

Hermione nodded. "Voldemort's real middle name. Merope named him after his father, and her father. What happened after that, sir?"

"Ogden returned to the Gaunt shack fifteen minutes later with reinforcements. They subdued the two men, who were both sentenced to Azkaban. Marvolo returned to the shack six months later, expecting to find what he thought was his squib daughter with dinner ready for him. She, however, had already left."

Snape cleared his throat. "It has been proven, on many occasions, that magic users in abusive situations do not always manifest their powers. Neville Longbottom is a very good example of this. Because of the trauma of his earlier life, he didn't begin to show accidental magic until he was eight years old. We believe," He gestured to himself and Dumbledore, "that Merope was so downtrodden that she was never able to access her magic until she left."

"So... Imperius or potions, I'd imagine." Hermione said. "She would have got the older Tom Riddle to fall in love with her, and got pregnant."

"Indeed." Dumbledore said. "Personally, I believe it to be a love potion. That way, the subject still displays normal behaviour, but they have the love inside them. People under the Imperius tend to be more zombie-like."

"But, something must have gone wrong." Harry said quietly. "He didn't stay with her. In the graveyard when me and Voldemort duelled, he said that he abandoned her when she told him what she was... so, she confessed about being a witch, and Tom Riddle Senior ran... I wonder why?" He frowned. "Surely the fear of being married to a witch wouldn't be enough to overpower a love potion."

Dumbledore nodded again. "This is why I love teaching you and your wife, Harry. You're such pleasures to teach."

"Seconded." Snape added quickly.

"We believe that Merope would have stopped feeding Tom Riddle the potions, in the belief that he truly loved her."

Hermione snorted. "I hate to seem rude, but that's impossible. That girl Tom was with, Cecilia, was gorgeous. He wasn't exactly hard on

the eyes himself. But Merope... well, I can't see anyone fancying her. She was a product of centuries of inbreeding... and she looked it."

"So," Harry summed up in conclusion, "Merope was delusional in believing that Tom loved her, and was also pregnant at the time. She stopped feeding him potions, and he ran away, probably back to Little Hangleton. Merope was left with a full belly and no hope."

"Correct." Dumbledore nodded, before reaching for another vial. "Now, we know, thanks to a rather cantankerous man named Caractacus Burke know that Merope Gaunt had made her way from Little Hangleton in Yorkshire down to London. The only thing she had with her was the locket around her neck..."

This memory was far shorter, only five or so minutes. Once they came out, Hermione was seething. §What a miserable old bastard!§ She hissed angrily, before realising that she'd slipped into Parseltongue. "Sorry, sir. But... ten galleons? For a thousand year old relic of one of the Founders and the miserable old bastard gave her ten galleons?"

"As I said, Burke was not renowned for his generosity." Dumbledore said softly. "However, to Merope, that was a fortune. It was enough to get her some food and lodging, things which she was desperately in need of at that time." He saw Hermione's mouth open, and correctly guessed her next complaint. "While Merope was a witch, we believe that she had reverted back to her squib state with the despair of losing the man she loved. Perhaps she felt that magic was part of the reason that he left, perhaps she was simply depressed."

Hermione nodded slowly. "She slipped away, didn't she?"

"She did." Snape confirmed. "On New Year's Eve, she gave birth to Voldemort, and an hour later, she passed to the next great adventure." He sighed heavily. "Had she fought, things would be so different..."

Dumbledore grabbed the next vial. "Now, this memory is mine. I believe you'll find it sufficiently rich in detail and accuracy." He poured the longer-than-normal strand into the Pensieve, and the four of them dived in.

When they came out, nearly a half hour later, the two teens were deep in thought. "Interesting..." Hermione mumbled.

"Terrifying." Harry corrected gently. "Even then, he was cold, cruel, independent... he believed you far easier than I would have about being a wizard, sir."

"He did."

"Did you know? Back then, I mean?"

"That I'd just met the most powerful Dark Lord in history?" Dumbledore asked. "No, I didn't. However, I was impressed with his control, and more than a little concerned."

"'I can make them hurt.'" Harry quoted softly. "He'd already begun to use wandless magic to control people. Also, I think he was able to lace his voice with a compulsion charm. When he told you to 'tell the truth!', he expected it to work, instantly."

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes... I believe so. Fortunately, a sufficiently powerful Occlumens can bypass a compulsion charm."

"He kept trophies." Hermione mumbled, still mentally digesting everything that had been said. "He was like a magpie. Sir," She looked up, "I think that's relevant, isn't it? His Horcruxes... they're trophies."

Snape grinned. "Like we said... a pleasure to teach."

"Indeed." Dumbledore chuckled. "Yes, we believe that his Horcruxes are trophies. Given that he was very similar to Harry in certain respects, we believe that he felt the same about Hogwarts as Harry does."



"It's home." Harry said simply. "But, not completely. My home is wherever Hermione is. But, before I became involved with my beautiful wife, I would have felt the same. So, you believe that his Horcruxes are Founders' relics, sir?"

"Yes. The locket, the ring, both relics of the Gaunt family, and therefore Slytherin. There is only one known relic of Gryffindor, and that is here in this room." All four pairs of eyes turned towards the Sword of Gryffindor, held in the glass presentation case. "However, there are a few known relics of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff that he may have used. I have been searching for those, but I have yet to find anything conclusive.

"And now, the evening draws on."

Harry glanced at his watch. "Sir, it's barely half-nine. We can keep going for a bit yet."

Dumbledore glanced at Snape, who nodded. "Very well." He reached for the next vial of memory. "This memory is of Morfin Gaunt, and is just after Tom Riddle's school days..."

"So, during those first lesson with Professor Dumbledore, we learnt a lot about Tom Riddle. Who was he? Why did he come from? What was his motivation? We covered all of Professor Dumbledore's memories during that first session." Harry looked down at Ron. "We allowed people to think that looking at Tom Riddle's memories took all year. It didn't. It took all night."

"After that, we started looking at other things. Researching the past relics of the Founders, looking up new spells. Listening to an old fairy tale that would undoubtedly become important. Finding ways to track Horcruxes... all important, necessary things for the task ahead. For we knew it would be our task. There was simply no alternative. Both the prophecy for Harry, and the sheer thirst to help my husband for me." Hermione concluded. "We knew the war was here, and we knew it was our time. We were going to fight, and we were going to win. Nothing else was acceptable."

Harry grinned. "So, we were taking our classes, and learning more about Voldemort. It was during the early part of sixth year that Ron Weasley found his hormones, and we found out that Ginny Weasley was on her... third?" He looked at Hermione, who nodded. "Third boyfriend. Personally, I didn't understand it. If she was desperate for me, why the hell was she dating around?"

"Of course, being the smartest witch of the generation, and a girl, I knew instantly: it was a plan to get Harry to notice that Ginny was a girl. Which, to be honest, he already knew." Hermione concluded. "He just wasn't interested."

"Too many Oedipal issues." Harry turned to the portrait behind him. "Don't get me wrong; my mum's a babe... and that's exactly why I could never date a red."

"Thank you, honey." Lily's portrait replied, blowing a kiss at him. "It's always nice to be appreciated."

"Anyway... Ron's hormones. Got back to the common room one evening, and found Ron sitting on the sofa, attempting to inhale Lavender's face. It looked utterly disgusting, and it was all thanks to Ginny's rant. Since Ron was woefully inexperienced with girls, something you could tell instantly just by talking to him, he picked, what he thought, was the 'easiest' girl in the year, to get himself some practice.

"Hermione saw the scene, and bolted out of the common room..."

Flashback: Abandoned Classroom, 7th Floor, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Saturday, 14th December, 1996

Harry entered the common room after the Quidditch match, and stopped in his tracks. There, on the couch in front of the fireplace, was Ron Weasley and Lavender Brown. At least... he thought so. All he could see was limbs thrashing about, and hear some rather grim squelching noises. I so don't wanna know what's making the noise.

He turned away from Ron, neatly bypassing Romilda Vane, who Hermione had warned him about earlier in the term, and departed from the common room. He came across Hermione in the first empty classroom he checked.

She was sitting on the desk, practicing her conjuration of small bird. "Hey, Harry."

He closed the door, putting a silencing charm up. "What's wrong, Hermione?"

"Ron." She said simply. "I don't get him. He's supposedly head over heels in love with me, or lust at least, and he's sitting there trying to inhale Lavender's lungs. It doesn't make any sense."

Harry sighed. "I think it does, Hermione. From the male perspective, at least. He's trying to make you jealous, just like Ginny's doing with me."

"But... it's so... gross." Hermione said with a pout. "I mean, we're not anywhere near that grim... are we?"

"It's you, baby." Harry crooned softly. "You couldn't look grim if you tried. No, he's after Lavender for one thing."

"He'll probably get it, too." Hermione said with a sigh. "Still, it's her life, and she knows the risks."

The door behind Harry suddenly burst open, revealing Ron, laughing uproariously, pulling Lavender by the hand. As soon as he saw Harry and Hermione in the room, his eyes narrowed. "Oh..."

"Oops." Lavender smirked as she backed out of the room, still giggling. The door closed with a quiet click.

"Hi, Harry." Ron said brightly, although his narrowed eyes were still firmly locked on his 'best mate'. "Wondered where you'd got to. I thought you were enjoying the party?"

"Not really." Harry said softly. "Hermione was not feeling well, so I came to check she's okay."

Ron glared at Hermione for a moment. "I'm sure she's fine, mate, but if you want to go back, I'll stay with her."

Harry and Hermione chuckled. "You just came in here to make sure that I'm not poaching, Weasley." Harry said. "You think that Hermione's yours."

"She is!" Ron blurted. "And you're Ginny's, so stay away from her, Potter!"

Hermione hopped off the desk, stepping over to Harry, and running her fingers through his hair. "You're so wrong, Weasley. I'm Harry's. He's mine. Always have been. Always will be."

"No!" Ron bellowed, drawing his wand.

"Obliviate!" Harry and Hermione intoned in unison. Hermione continued. "You didn't see or hear anything, Ronald. Me and Harry were talking, nothing more. You shall go and find Lavender as soon as you leave this room." She stepped to the door. "But... Oppungo!" Another flock of birds erupted from her wand, waking Ron from his daze.

She winked at Harry as she left the room, slamming the door.

"Ron..." Harry said mournfully. "You really need to work on your tact and diplomacy..." He casually stepped away, leaving the flock of birds attacking his 'best mate'.

"Now, I'll admit, it was funny." Harry said, chuckling to himself. "Watching Ron being chased all over a classroom by canaries... Ah, good times."

"Christmas was approaching." Hermione smoothly carried on. "Unlike previous years, I had not been invited to spend the holidays with the Weasley family. Personally, I think the reason for this is that Harry was more valuable to the Weasley family than I was, considering the

rather large family fortune he possesses. Plus, it was a way for Ginny to flirt mercilessly without interference from me."

"Naturally, I didn't want to be separated from my wife for Christmas. It was our first Christmas as a married couple. Again, however, the bloody Weasleys knew too much, and could make our lives far too difficult. So, we split, Hermione going back to her parents' with Order guards, while I went to the Burrow. Again, we had our communicators, and if need be, we could Portkey across to each other.

"Of course, the Weasleys were... well, not exactly happy about my reticence about Ginny..."

Flashback: The Burrow, Ottery St. Catchpole, Devonshire  
Wednesday, 25th December, 1996

Harry woke up with a start, feeling an overwhelming urge that someone was watching him. As he sat up, he heard the door close with a faint 'click', making him sigh.

And again... He reached under his pillow, pulling out a small box with a screen. Dear god, it's a piss thought as he read the times they attempted to approach my bed last night... Seventeen bloody times! When will they learn?

Harry grabbed his wand, casting a scanning charm around himself. And there's more compulsion charms. Great... He absently dispelled them as he grabbed his wash bag, and hauled himself out of bed.

Once in the bathroom, he locked the door, casting a Muffliato on the walls, before tapping his watch. "Hermione Potter!"

After a moment, a tiny smiling face appeared. "Hey, gorgeous!" Hermione squealed, blowing him a kiss. "How're you?"

Harry had a mouthful of toothpaste, so ducked down to spit it out before answering. "I hate it here, Hermione. Why couldn't I have just come to your house with you?"

"They still trying to get you in bed?" Hermione asked, sitting up. Harry's attention was drawn to the fact that the small image wasn't wearing nightwear. "Eyes up, Harry." She laughed. "Come on... you can ravish me in ten days, lover."

"Ten days..." Harry groused. "I hate this, Hermione. I really do. They tried to get me seventeen times last night alone. Seventeen! Why won't they just figure out that I'm really not interested?"

"You're too rich." Hermione replied. "You're rich, famous and popular, Harry. I'm honoured that you'd lower yourself to be with me."

"Not this again!" Harry moaned. "Hermione, we've been through this."

"I know... still, like I said. Only ten more days."

Harry sighed, before lathering up his face. He preferred a wet shave to using the depilatory spell. He didn't know why. After a moment, he pulled out his Mach 3, and began scraping the stubble away. "Have you opened your presents yet?"

"No, not yet." Hermione said, clambering out of her bed. "I figured I'd wait until I see you to open the one from you. I get the feeling that Ron's sent me something he thinks is romantic."

"As long as it's not another bottle of the drain cleaner. I swear that stuff gave me rashes." Harry began swilling off the excess foam from his face. "Seriously, how could he consider that perfume?"

"I have no idea." Hermione said, standing up. A moment later, the toilet flushed. "You know, I still think we should be weird about that."

Harry chuckled. "Hermione, my dear... I've seen you having a screaming multiple orgasm. More to the point, I've seen you having screaming multiple orgasms that I've induced. Talking to you while you're on the loo really doesn't compare."

For a few moments, the image in Harry's watch wavered wildly as Hermione washed her hands. "How's Fleur coping?"

Harry lifted the toilet seat, before attending to his rather pressing need. "Er... well, she's not best pleased to be here, either. Molly's still trying to get Bill and Tonks together, which is making Remus gnash his teeth constantly. Fleur's somehow managing to ignore Molly... which is impressing the hell out of me, to be honest."

Hermione closed the lid, and sat down on the loo again, so she could continue talking to her husband. "Is Remus okay? Apart from gnashing his teeth at Molly?"

"You mean, 'has he recovered from Sirius' death?'" Harry clarified. "Yeah, I think so. He still misses him, as do I, but we're coping. We've each got the love of a good woman to sustain us."

Hermione smiled sappily at Harry. "Sometimes, Harry, you really do set my teeth on edge with all this sweetness." She blew him a little kiss. "But, since I love you, I won't complain." She tilted her arm as she looked at the face of her watch, before looking back at the mirror. "I can hear Mum and Dad getting up, Harry. I'll keep my watch open as a Code 7, so I can listen in."

"Okay, honey. I'll speak to you later."

Harry closed the face down on his watch without ending the call, before he released the lock on the bathroom door. As he stepped out, he heard voices.

"...a bloody thing, Mum!" Ginny was protesting. "I didn't get a single present from him!"

Molly's mollifying voice sounded. "I know, baby, and I'm sorry about that. As soon as the potion kicks in, you'll have access to one of the largest family fortunes in the Wizarding world. You'll be able to buy anything that you want."

Ginny's petulant voice spoke up. "Why should I wait? I mean... I've been waiting for this for years! I've had to turn down five other guys who want to date me, just so I can keep close to Potter."

"I know, Ginny, I know." Molly soothed. "Just give it a little more time. If he doesn't start to respond soon, we'll up the dosage and make it happen."

"Fine." Ginny sulked. "But I won't wait too much longer, Mum."

Oh yes, you will. Harry thought to himself. I will never lower myself to be with you, Ginevra. I'd rather shag... actually, I can't even think of a suitably low creature to compare you to. He began whistling as he walked up the stairs to Ron's room.

Once inside, he saw the pile of presents on the bottom of the bed, with Ron awake and rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Mornin'." Ron slurred through a yawn. "Cool. Presents." With that, he began tearing through the wrapping paper.

Harry sat on the edge of his bed and reached for a package. The first was from Ron, and when he gracefully tore off the paper, he found a case of chocolate frogs. Huh... Could you spare the money, you cheap bastard? Harry wondered. At seven Knuts a frog, less than one pound in real money, Harry's present had cost the redhead less than a fiver.

"Hey!" Ron protested as he held up the gift from Harry; a book entitled A History of Losers: The Chudley Cannons. "This is insulting!"

"It's truth, Ron." Harry said tonelessly. "They've not won the league in... actually, ever. It's a complete history of the club, though. Apparently, it's even better than Flying with the Cannons."

"Oh..." Ron flipped the cover and began reading.

The gift from the twins made Harry grit his teeth. It was a large cardboard box, filled with WWW products. And again, cheap bastards. I get this stuff for free, anyway. He sighed as he pushed it to one side.

Picking up a squishy package, he had to forcibly restrain the urge to set fire to it, before blowing up the Burrow. Yet again, an insulting Weasley sweater. Oh, one day, Molly... He flicked his wand over it in a discrete scan, picking up a compulsion charm. Curious, he placed



his hand on the sleeve, feeling an overwhelming urge to go and sit with Ginny. Fortunately, his Occlumency skills managed to deflect the urge, and he dispelled the compulsion. Oh, the temptation to kill everyone...

Harry opened another squishy present, curious about who it was from. To his delight and horror, a Blast-Ended Skrewt looked up at him. A plushy Blast-Ended Skrewt. Ah... Hagrid was obviously inspired by my present last year. With a bang, the Skrewt leapt off the bed, making Ron jump.

"What the bloody hell's that?"

"Present from Hagrid." Harry said with a grin. "I guess he remembers how much we liked the Skrewts. This is cool."

"Oh." Ron said slowly. "What did you get for him?"

"Some cooking pots and a cakes and biscuits cookbook." Harry replied. "Hopefully, he'll learn how to make rock cakes that aren't actually made of rock."

"Hmm... good luck with that." Ron said as he reached for another present.

Harry grabbed a thick, hard present, marked from McGonagall and Remus. A book? I wonder what it is. He ripped off the paper, looking at the spine. No title... He opened it up, and nearly dropped it in shock. The book was a special edition, one-off print, made specifically for him. What amazed him, though, was the title page.

Marauding Thesis

"Combating Dark Families" by Sirius Black

"Dealing With Bumbling Magical Idiots" by Lily Evans

"Living With Werewolves" by Remus Lupin

"Countering Betrayal" by Peter Pettigrew

"Illegal Animagi" by James Potter

"Modifying Existing Potions" by Severus Snape

He was stunned. The book was thick and rich with detail.

"What's that?" Ron asked as he pulled off yet more wrapping paper.

"It's... it's some of my Mum and Dad's school work." Harry said softly. "Their graduating thesis. All of them... McGonagall made this for me." Harry felt awful that he'd given her such a crappy present in return. While How to care for that Naughty Kitten was an appropriate gag gift, it was nothing compared to such a treasure as this. He made a mental note to give the woman an extra firm hug as soon as he could.

He put the book reverently into his trunk, wrapping it up inside some clothes to make sure it wasn't damaged. Wiping away a tear, he pulled the next present forward, another thick, heavy book. It was from Dumbledore. ... Blood Magic, and How to Counter It. Should be useful when dealing with Voldemort. He knew the old man would enjoy the book of Dirty Jokes he'd bought him. For all his advanced age, he was still a big kid at heart, and would enjoy fart jokes as much as anyone.

The final present was from Snape, another book, thinner than the last. He tore off the paper, to find a limited-print textbook, How to Gain Your Potions Mastery by Severus Snape. Harry had actually heard of this book. There had only been fifty copies printed, and it was considered the definitive guide to becoming a potions master. The book sold for almost two hundred galleons per copy. Anyone who used it could gain their mastery, it was that well written. I hope he likes the animated Batman toy. Was Harry's thought.

"I won't wear that!" Ron near-screamed, drawing Harry's attention back up to the redhead. In his hands was a piece of bling jewellery, that made Harry snicker. A huge silver bracelet, with 'My Sweetheart' written on it. "Why won't she leave me alone?"

Harry kept chuckling. "I think she believes you're together, Ron. It's only natural to buy your loved one a present, isn't it?"

"We're not... I mean... shut up, Harry." Ron snapped, throwing the bracelet to the far side of his bed, when it conveniently fell onto the floor.

Hours later, after sitting down for an immense Christmas dinner, there was a knock on the door. Molly stood up, wand in hand, only to drop it in shock. "Oh, Arthur... it's Percy!" The door was flung open and the wayward Weasley was dragged into a smothering hug.

Harry's eyes narrowed as he saw who was accompanying the lost Weasley. He quickly tapped his watch with his wand twice, sending the emergency 'listen in' signal. Remus' eyes widened as he felt his watch vibrate, before excusing himself and rushing into the bathroom to listen in.

"...if anybody cared to show me your charming garden... Ah, that young man's finished, why doesn't he take a stroll with me?" Scrimgeour was saying.

Harry nodded as he stood up. "I'd be honoured, Minister." He stepped towards the door, grabbing his cloak, before stepping into the garden. He knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that Scrimgeour was here to see him, his lies about Percy notwithstanding.

Scrimgeour stomped over to the fence, looking out at the rolling hills of the Devonshire countryside. "It's charming here."

"Yes." Harry said simply.

Looking out for a few moments, Scrimgeour was gathering his thoughts. "I've wanted to meet you for a very long time, Harry. May I call you Harry?"

"You may." Harry said tonelessly.

"Did you know I wanted to meet you?"

Harry decided to go for broke. After all, he still had the protection of being a 'child', and Dumbledore. "I'd heard rumours, Minister, that you wanted to meet me. However, I've never received an invitation to speak to you, or even a letter to that effect, so you'll forgive me for not taking the time to see you."

Scrimgeour nodded. "Dumbledore has been very protective of you." He said softly.

"I'm very protective of him." Harry volleyed.

"It's natural, of course." Scrimgeour continued, looking out into the hills. "Especially with what you've been through... facing He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named all those times... and of course, at the Ministry last June..." He trailed off, inviting Harry to speak.

"Indeed." Was Harry's single-word response.

"I've been hoping to speak to you ever since I gained office back in July, but as I said, Dumbledore prevented this." Scrimgeour finally turned to face Harry, prompting the younger man to tighten his Occlumency shields.

Harry just waited, letting Scrimgeour commit himself to a course of action.

"All the rumours that have been running rampant throughout the country!" Scrimgeour said suddenly. "Rumours about you being 'the Chosen One', a prophecy... but, we know how these rumours get blown out of proportion."

"Considering the Daily Prophet seems to make up whatever it wants to sell newspapers, I'd take anything it prints with a metric ton of salt, Minister." Harry said dismissively.

"I assume that Dumbledore has discussed these matters with you?" Scrimgeour said, eyeing Harry hungrily.

"Oddly enough, we have had a few conversations on this very subject." Harry said firmly. "Very enlightening conversations, Minister." He waited a moment. "Was that all you wanted to know?"

Scrimgeour's full attention was now focussed on Harry. "And what has Dumbledore told you, Harry?"

"The truth, Minister." Harry countered. "Nothing but the truth. And I'm afraid that our conversations were private."

"Ah." Scrimgeour nodded. "I wouldn't want you to betray your confidence with Dumbledore. No, not at all." He began inspecting one of the frozen flower beds. "Does it really matter if you're the 'Chosen One'?"

Harry shrugged. "I'm not sure what it is you're getting at, Minister. Do you have a specific question?"

Scrimgeour continued. "To the Wizarding world, Harry, morale is everything. The people believe you to be a hero to us all, Harry."

"No, they don't." Harry replied instantly. "Just six months ago, they were all convinced I'm an attention-seeking psychopath, who was working tirelessly to destroy the Ministry of Magic. The people are sheep, Minister."

Again, Scrimgeour carried on without stopping. "How many times have you faced He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?"

"Five."

"The point is," Scrimgeour was beginning to lose a little of his cool, but he battled on, "You're a symbol of hope to the world, Harry. The very idea that there's someone who's destined to defeat You-Know-Who... naturally, it will boost the moral of the country considerably. And I can't help but think that once you realise this, you'll do your duty, and stand with the Ministry, giving everyone that boost."

Harry's eyes narrowed slightly. "And what exactly do you mean by 'stand with the Ministry'?"

"Oh, nothing strenuous, my boy!" Scrimgeour said jovially, sounding very similar to Horace Slughorn for a moment. "If you were to be seen popping into the Ministry every so often, that would send the right message to the people. While you're at the Ministry, of course, you'd be able to gain some valuable experience with the Aurors."

Harry nodded. "And this 'popping into the Ministry' would actually be seen as supporting your administration, wouldn't it, Minister? As though you and I are on the same page, working together to defeat Voldemort."

"That's the general idea, Harry." Scrimgeour said with relief. "I can see that you're quite a sharp young man."

On the other end of Harry's communicator, several people winced in unison. There wasn't a quicker way to turn Harry nasty than to patronise him. Well, try and kill him or Hermione, true, but being patronising was a close second.

"Then we appear to have a problem, Minister." Harry replied amiably. "Because, you see... I don't support the Ministry. Frankly, their actions over the last two years have been nothing short of criminal. I don't like criminals. I told the Ministry eighteen months ago that Voldemort was back, and what did the-then Minister say? Oh, yes... 'he can't be back'. That was it. No investigation, no increase to the Aurors. Just burying his head in the sand. And then, they launched a full-sized smear campaign, against me and my mentor. People have been arrested and sent to Azkaban, without trials. Why should I support such a corrupt government, Minister?"

"I knew that you wouldn't understand." Scrimgeour near-growled. "You're just a child, Potter. These are desperate times-"

"I'm aware of that." Harry interrupted. "However, desperate times do not necessarily call for desperate measures. Locking up Stan Shunpike serves no purpose at all. The only reason you're refusing to release him is that you know you'll look bad. And at the moment, you're not concerned with saving Magical Britain. You're concerned with saving your arse." Harry took a moment to gather his thoughts. "Also, I don't particularly like your tactics for meeting with me today."

"Oh?" Scrimgeour asked icily.

"Yes... you brought Percy Weasley here, not to make up with his family, but with the sole purpose of having a private conversation with

me. You've introduced a false measure of hope with the Weasleys that is entirely unjustified."

"I don't know what you mean." Scrimgeour bluffed.

"And now you're lying to me." Harry returned. "True, I don't have Dumbledore's instincts or knowledge, but I know when people are trying to play me, Minister... and you're doing it right now."

"I see." Scrimgeour said stiffly. "Then you're like Dumbledore. You're rather disassociate yourself from the Ministry?"

"Not at all." Harry replied. "I'll support a just and honest Ministry. When we get one, I'll be the first in line to sing their praises. Until that time, I will not be used."

"It's your duty to be used by the Ministry!" Scrimgeour snapped.

"No... it's my duty to obey the laws of the Ministry." Harry corrected. "And I have done so. Anything else is surplus to requirements. All you want to do is save your arse and pretend that you've got 'the Chosen One' working for you." He shook his head slowly. "Sorry..."

"So... you're not 'the Chosen One'?" Scrimgeour pounced on the comment.

"I didn't say that." Harry replied with a smirk. "I didn't say anything then, and I'm not saying anything now. Irrespective of my being 'Chosen' or not, Harry Potter will not support you, Minister."

Scrimgeour stared for a moment. "Where does Dumbledore go when he's not at Hogwarts?" He demanded brusquely.

"Shopping, I'd imagine." Harry replied. "He goes through lemon drops like you wouldn't believe. Plus, he enjoys bowling. Next time he's out, I'd suggest you try a bowling alley."

The Minister wasn't biting. "What is he up to?"

"Why don't you ask him, Minister?"

Again, the man stared at him. "I will find out, one way or the other."

"You're welcome to try, Minister." Harry sniggered. "But, I'll tell you this; Fudge tried to interfere at Hogwarts, and he got his arse handed to him quite soundly. I'm still there. Dumbledore's still there. You... you seem smarter than Fudge, but even you should know that you can't beat Dumbledore... and you can't beat me, either."

Scrimgeour turned and began stomping back to the house. "It's clear he's done a very thorough job on you, Potter. Dumbledore's man through and through, aren't you?"

"Exactly." Harry replied. "I have been, am, and ever shall be Dumbledore's man, through and through. Enjoy your trip back to the Ministry, sir. I hope it's as pleasant for you as it is for me." Harry turned and took a few steps away, looking out into the hills. He heard Scrimgeour stomp away, before opening his watch. "Did you get that?"

"I'm touched, Harry." Dumbledore's voice came over the communicator, sounding rather damp. "Very touched."

"Ah, you know it's true, sir. After everything you've done for me? How could I be anything but?"

"Another thing we have in common, Harry." Snape spoke up. "I, too, consider myself Dumbledore's man, through and through."

"Dumbledore's." Hermione added.

"Dumbledore's." McGonagall said.

"Dumbledore's." Remus added.

"Remus'." Tonks said, completing the set.

"Tonks." Harry chuckled.



"Sorry. Seemed to be a very heavy moment there." Tonks replied cheerily. "So, you didn't kiss the Minister's arse, Harry. I'm proud of you. Padfoot would be, too."

"The man looks like he doesn't shower." Harry grunted and he leaned against the fence. "Is he for real? Sneaking here on Christmas day to get my support? Exactly how dumb does he think I am?"

"If he's been reading your school reports, quite." Snape said dryly. "Also, remember that Dee is still at the Ministry, and she'll be talking up a storm about how troublesome you are."

"Yeah, I've not heard from her in a while... I wonder how she is." Harry shook his head. "Ah, she's a survivor. She'll be okay. Professor Dumbledore, should I have handled that differently?"

"Not at all, Harry. You're aware of the political situation as well as anyone. You could have lied to him, but he's a rather distinguished Auror, and he has a dung detector that's very accurate. You handled him superbly."

"He'll be coming for us." Harry said softly.

"I know." Dumbledore replied simply. "While he was a very effective Auror, he's not the best candidate for Minister. He's too much like Cornelius in that respect."

"We'll do what we always do." Harry said, a small grin washing over his face. The other six completed the phrase with him. "We'll stand and fight."

Harry cleared his throat, draining his glass of Butterbeer. For a moment, silence reigned in the hall. Harry looked at Percy. "How does it feel to be used, Percy? Used by the Ministry of Magic? I bet it sucked. Can you see now why I refused?"

Percy kept his gaze firmly on his notes, ignoring the question.

"When we returned to Hogwarts, we made sure everyone else was briefed on the situation." Harry continued the tale. "Tonks popped up

one weekend, and we showed her the memories of Tom Riddle. She knew about the Horcruxes. Remus had known most of the story as it unfolded. Severus had some mental programming done, that if Voldemort managed to penetrate his Occlumency shields, the information would be Obliviated from his mind. We were preparing for a hell of a war.

"My next assignment from Professor Dumbledore was to get a memory from Horace Slughorn, because it was him that gave Tom Riddle information about Horcruxes. Not a lot, since Tom already knew about them, but it was enough for him to carry on."

In the audience, several people eyed the chubby man warily.

"Using the Felix Felicis potion, I was able to get the memory, and showed it to Dumbledore. We knew then that we were dealing with seven pieces of Voldemort's soul, with two of them already destroyed. One by me in the Chamber of Secrets in 1993, and another by Professor Dumbledore in summer 1996. Two down, five to go, and we were beginning to catch up."

"It was during one of our lessons, in mid-February," Hermione continued, "that the Harry doll flew up to the Headmaster's office..."

Flashback: Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Saturday, 15th February, 1996

Dumbledore was finishing assigning the two homework, researching the flame-whip spell, when something banged the door to Dumbledore's office. Three wands fell instantly to hand as they turned to the door. With a quick flick, Dumbledore opened the door, watching as... nothing came in.

A moment later, there was a slight thud on the desk. With a ripple, the little Harry Potter action figure was re-illusioned, standing at attention and saluting at Dumbledore, who grinned and saluted back. The figure did a smart about-face, before saluting Harry and Hermione.

"Oh, he's so cute!" Hermione squealed as she returned the salute.

Shaking his head, Harry tapped his wand on the doll, triggering the playback.

"...hear me now?" The voice of Malfoy shouting filled the office.  
"Borgin, can you hear me?"

"Borgin..." Harry repeated. "How's he talking to him?"

"Bloody cabinet..." Malfoy groused. "Damn thing's taking too long to fix."

"The vanishing cabinet." Hermione said at once. "Sir, do they-"

"Yes." Dumbledore interrupted. "Yes... they come in pairs. Oh, dear lord..."

"It's clever." Harry grunted. "Step into Borgin and Burkes, a place where no-one will question the presence of a Death Eater, and they'll instantly be at Hogwarts, bypassing all the defences."

"We have to stop him." Hermione said at once. "Sir, if we destroy the vanishing cabinet-"

"Wait." Harry said, placing his hand on Hermione's arm. "This is something we can use. If Malfoy's working on the vanishing cabinet, we know who, what, when and how. If we destroy it, Malfoy will become desperate." He turned to Dumbledore. "Is there any way to sabotage the cabinet, sir, without making it obvious?"

"Possibly..." Dumbledore said softly. "I believe we should call a staff meeting, Harry. Would you contact Remus and Tonks while I summon Minerva and Severus?"

Bare minutes later, Remus and Tonks were listening in on the communicator, while Professors McGonagall and Snape had sat down, listening to the replay on the action figure.

"Ambitious." Was all Snape said.

"Potentially disastrous." McGonagall spoke up. "There's no limit to how many Death Eaters they could bring in. Even Voldemort himself could simply step through. This has a very high risk, Albus."

"Agreed." Snape said. "But, if we simply destroy the cabinet, Malfoy will stop at nothing to complete his mission. Far too many innocents could be hurt."

"But if we do nothing, far too many innocents will be hurt." McGonagall countered.

"I believe that Harry had the correct solution." Dumbledore said calmly. "If we were to sabotage the cabinet, forcing Mr. Malfoy to keep repairing it, we would have a chance to control when, where and how the Death Eaters enter Hogwarts."

"We'd need to lock down the dorms." Remus replied. "And have Order personnel available to patrol the castle. I agree that this could turn very nasty, very quickly, Albus."

"We need a way to lock all doors in the castle instantly." Dumbledore muttered, clearly thinking out loud. "Leaving a single path through the school, that could be monitored by the Order. That way, when they do invade, we'd have a chance of bottle-necking them."

"It's risky, sir." Harry said.

"Unfortunately, Hogwarts is far too easy to penetrate for a sneak attack." Dumbledore admitted. "It's easy keeping people in, and keeping armies out. But, if they have a way to bypass all the defences... I don't like this. Too many things could go wrong."

"Well, let's work it through." Hermione said, grabbing a sheet of parchment. "They'll be coming in on the seventh floor, through the Room of Requirement..."

"So, we now had a rough idea of the plan of attack from the Death Eaters, courtesy of the little ferret. We knew how they'd be coming in, and the route they'd have to take. Of course, we didn't know how many would be coming, or which ones, but again, we were catching up." Harry said. "Professor Snape was constantly picking at Malfoy, trying to find out the plan. Unfortunately for us, Malfoy had received some Occlumency training from Bellatrix LeStrange, so he was protected, and we couldn't afford the chance that Voldemort would scan Malfoy's mind and find out that Severus wasn't loyal."

"Would have been worth it." Snape grumbled in his portrait.

"So, we carried on. Every few days, one of us would sneak into the Room of Requirement and sabotage the cabinet. A crack here. Removing one of the enchantments there. Not enough to make Malfoy suspicious, but enough to slow the little shit down."

Hermione cleared her throat. "One of my favourite memories, real memories, I mean, not the fakes we perpetuated, was what happened to Ron Weasley on his birthday. According to 'official' history, Ron ate one of the love-potioned chocolates, and Harry managed to stop him embarrassing himself. Of course..." Hermione smiled at the letters floating above her head flashed, "he only believed what we wanted him to believe..."

Flashback: 6th Year Boys' Dormitory, Gryffindor Tower, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Saturday, 1st March, 1997

Harry woke up at Ron's happy squawk. He rolled over, gesturing wildly at Hermione, who was rubbing sleep from her eyes as she grabbed her invisibility cloak and vanished.

"Morning, Ron." Harry called out blearily. "What're you so happy about?"

Ron stopped his unwrapping rampage to stare at Harry incredulously. "It's my birthday!" He said joyously. "I'm of-age, now!"

"Oh, yeah... right." Harry nodded as he got up. "Happy Birthday." He reached under his bed, pulling out a wrapped box. "Here, have a present." He threw the box onto Ron's bed, before vanishing for an urgent call of nature.

When he got back, Ron had finished unwrapping the new Keeper's gloves. "Cheers for these, Harry." He tossed them to one side, opening a smallish present from his parents. "Whoa..." He held up a thick gold watch. "I think I'll come of-age next year, too..."

As Harry watched, he tore into a box of chocolate cauldrons. He had to stifle a grin as he recognised them as the 'gift' from a certain love-struck witch, and almost certainly laced with a love potion.

Harry vanished for a shower, coming back ten minutes later to see Ron stood by the window, looking outside with a glazed expression. He didn't bother to stop the smirk this time. "You okay, mate?"

"Harry... I can't stand it!" Ron erupted suddenly.

"Can't stand what?" Harry asked innocently.

"I can't stop thinking about her." Ron exclaimed, sighing dramatically.

"Why does that stop you having breakfast?" Harry asked as he laced up his shoes. "I'm sure you can think about her during breakfast."

"I don't think she knows I exist." Ron sighed again.

"Oh, I'm sure she knows you exist, Ron." Harry said, standing up and stomping his feet, settling his shoes on. "Come on... let's go find her."

Ron blinked. "Who are you talking about?"

"Who are you talking about?" Harry countered.

"Romilda Vane." Ron sighed yet again. "I... I think I love her, Harry."

"Oh... okay." Harry said dismissively. "Tell you what, let's go down to the common room, and I'll see if Hermione can bring her down to you."

Ron's face lit up, and he quickly grabbed a sweater before following Harry.

Once down in the common room, Harry asked a first year girl to run upstairs to Hermione's dorm-room. Less than a minute later, Hermione came bounding down the stairs. "Morning, Harry. Morning, Ron."

Harry gestured Hermione over, and began whispering urgently in her ear. "Ron ate those laced chocolate cauldrons that Romilda gave me. At the moment, he's head over heels for her."

"Ron... the victim of a love potion?" Hermione grinned. "It seems fate really does have a sense of irony."

"Doesn't it?" Harry agreed. "Anyway, after all the kindness Ron has shown us over the years, I thought we should repay that, don't you?"

Hermione's grin widened. "I'll go and find Romilda." She smirked at Ron, before heading for the stairs.

"Harry?"

"She's just gone to find her, mate." Harry said cheerfully. "She should be down in a moment."

"Won-Won?" Lavender stood near the portrait hole, a small present in her hands. "You're late. I got you a present-"

"Take a hike." Ron said angrily. "I'm waiting for Romilda."

Lavender's eyes filled up with tears as she bolted for the portrait hole. Harry felt bad for a moment, but then remembered that Lavender rather enjoyed picking on Hermione.

"...going on, Hermione?" Romilda's voice came from the stairs. "Why do we need to be down there this early in the morning? Honestly, couldn't it have waited until I'm awake and had breakfast?"

"You don't want to miss this." Hermione said supportively. Which, technically speaking, wasn't true. Harry and Hermione didn't want to miss this. Romilda could have probably gone her whole life avoiding what was about to happen.

"Romilda!" Ron said joyously, bounding over.

Hermione went to stand beside Harry and watch the carnage unfold. Ron took Romilda's hands gently, before kneeling before her. The black-haired girl glared daggers at Harry and Hermione, who gave her identical little jaunty waves, before turning and heading for the portrait hole.

"Breakfast?" Harry asked.

"Sure."

The pair had barely gotten into the Great Hall when a screaming girl ran through the Entrance Hall, making a break for freedom to the grounds. Behind her, a red-haired man was pursuing, with a shorter redhead girl tailing after them both.

"Good morning." Dumbledore said from right behind them.

"Morning, sir." Harry said politely. "Isn't it lovely weather for the first of March?"

"Indeed." Dumbledore replied. "Would you care to tell me why Ms. Vane is fleeing the school?"

"Probably because Ron's chasing her, sir." Hermione replied.

"Ah. Yes, of course. And... why is Mr. Weasley chasing her?"



"Might have something to do with a batch of love potion-laced chocolates." Harry admitted. "They were given to me, but Ron found them and ate a good number of them."

"Ah." Dumbledore nodded, clearly enjoying the moment. "You do know that if Molly overhears of such an action, she will be... annoyed."

"Yes." Hermione said. "But, they've been trying to lace us for two years. We could have stopped it, true, but we felt that irony should be served."

"Secretly, I agree with you." Dumbledore admitted softly. "But, Molly will no doubt create a great deal of noise and problems if she were to overhear of this. And you know that Ms. Weasley will not doubt make a report as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir." Harry groaned softly.

"I believe that if you were to coral Mr. Weasley and take him to Professor Slughorn for an antidote, we'd be able to get the whole mess cleared up."

"Yes, sir." Harry replied, squeezing Hermione's hand for a moment, before stepping out to follow the running Weasleys. As he walked away, he heard Hermione's last comment.

"You spoil all our fun, Professor."

"So, I took Ron to Slughorn, where he gave him an antidote, and then we shared a bottle of mead." Harry continued. "Of course, the mead was poisoned, one of Draco Malfoy's attempts to kill Dumbledore."

Dumbledore's portrait cleared his throat. "A poor plan. I check... I checked my food and drink routinely for poisons and other substances, have done ever since the early forties, before I defeated Grindelwald. It wasn't uncommon for his assassins to try and poison people."

"We do it, too." Harry replied. "Anyway, I managed to shove a bezoar down Ron's throat, and dragged him to the hospital wing. While there, Fred and George turned up."

"They were up in Hogsmeade to look at buying Zonko's." Hermione took over the monologue. "Of course, they found out that they didn't have enough money to do so, thanks to the contract that they'd signed with Harry, since he got half of the profits, and their scheme to stop that was derailed."

"On the plus side, I now had three Weasley life-debts." Harry said. "Ginny, for the Chamber of Secrets. Arthur, for the warning about Nagini, and now Ron, for the poisoned mead."

Two of the named Weasleys paled as they began to realise that Harry could order their deaths with absolutely nothing to stop him. Arthur was serene; he knew that he owed the young man a life-debt, and had no problems with it. He'd done right by the lad, after all. The only thing he could be accused of is that he hadn't found out what his wife and children had been doing.

Fred and George were sitting horrified in the audience. They glared up at Harry and Hermione, conveniently giving Hermione a chance to scan their thoughts. She leaned in close to Harry. "Fred and George are pissed that you're the reason they couldn't buy Zonko's. They thought that by recording inaccurate profits, they'd be able to scam you."

"Shame." Harry whispered back, but he could see the twins glaring at him.

"They're also planning to up to dosage and force you to marry Ginny, so they can help themselves to your vaults. They don't really care about what happens to me." She pressed a small kiss against his cheek, and leaned back into her own chair.

Harry cleared his throat, thrown off his stride by the threat from the Weasleys. "Okay, let's recap a little, shall we? Malfoy was plotting to kill Dumbledore using a vanishing cabinet. We knew about it, thanks to the action figure I received from Professor McGonagall for

Christmas. We'd already made plans for the defence of the school, sealing off the dormitories and leaving only a single path through the school."

"On a more personal level, we were now married." Hermione said, her face beaming. "We were so far ahead in our studies, we could have passed every one of our NEWTs right then and there. We'd been learning from Dumbledore all about Tom Riddle when he was just a kid. We'd been taught high-intensity combat magicks, as well as Dumbledore's collection of dirty tricks, with the occasional special guest appearance of Mad-Eye Moody. We knew about the Horcruxes, and we were hiding that knowledge from the Ministry."

Harry nodded for a moment, gathering his thoughts, before he carried on. "It was early May that the next incident of note occurred. I knew that Malfoy was sneaking around, and one day, while I was walking past Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, I heard him in there. He was panicking, quite understandable, considering we kept sabotaging his repairs on the vanishing cabinet. When I walked into the bathroom, Malfoy saw me, and began a spell."

Hermione snorted. "What Harry's not saying is that the incantation was Cruci..." She trailed off. "Harry had to think of something quickly, and cast a spell he'd seen in Professor Snape's notes, a modified slashing curse."

"Myrtle began screaming 'murder!' in the bathroom." Harry said. "Only a moment later, the door opened, and in came Professor Snape..."

Flashback: Girls' Bathroom, 1st Floor, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Wednesday, 7th May, 1997

Snape stomped into the bathroom, his face livid. He took one look at the fallen Malfoy and cursed loudly. Kneeling down, he traced his wand over the gashes on his godson's body, almost singing an

incantation. The wounds slowly began to heal up, making Malfoy moan.

"Come on, Draco." Snape said, pulling himself to his feet. "You need the hospital wing." He led his godson to the door. "Potter, you will wait here for me."

Harry leaned against the sink, breathing heavily. Myrtle had long since dived back into her u-bend, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

After ten minutes had passed, the door was flung open again, before Snape slammed it shut, sealing it and casting a silencing charm. He stared at Harry hard for a moment. "I hope you have a very good reason for using that spell, Harry. It's extremely dangerous."

Harry nodded, closing his eyes as he created a small hole in his mind barriers. "Come and take a look, sir." He opened his eyes.

Snape's glare intensified as he stared into Harry's mind. Harry watched the scene replay, noting that Malfoy's first spell was an Unforgiveable.

"Bloody idiot!" Snape roared, making Harry squirm backwards. Snape just glared. "Not you." He sighed. "Draco. Had he managed to complete that incantation, it would have alerted the Headmaster and the Aurors."

Harry nodded slowly. "I... it was the first spell that came to mind, sir."

Snape sighed. "Calm yourself, Harry. I'm not angry with you. Bloody furious with Draco, but there has been no harm done. Sectusempra is a spell of my own design. I know how to cure it, and have already told Madam Pomfrey. He'll be fine after a night's rest in the hospital wing." Snape came and leaned on the sink next to Harry, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. "I don't blame you, Harry. Having been on the receiving end of the Cruciatus myself, I can understand the need to prevent that."

"Thanks, Sev." Harry replied softly. "What happens now?"

Snape sighed again. "Poppy will have to inform the Headmaster. I've no doubt that Myrtle will already be sharing the news about you..." He scowled. "And Peeves will almost certainly have made up yet another new song about you."

"Detentions, sir?" Harry asked.

"Probably for the best." Snape looked out, his eyes becoming distant. "I have a... a feeling that there is a great change coming, Harry. Things are going to escalate completely out of control. I think our 'detentions' would be best served if I were to provide you with as much information as possible about the Death Eaters."

Harry nodded. "I feel it, too. There's a storm coming, sir. A black and terrible storm."

"We must do what we can." Snape said. "I believe that, if it comes down to it, Albus will order me to side with the Death Eaters, so that I can maintain my cover." He stood up. "Make sure you bring one of your notebooks. I'll show you how to enhance the security on it."

As Snape reached the door, he lowered the silencing charm, before letting his face turn back into the cruel mask. "Every Saturday, Potter."

"But, sir..." Harry said, stepping away from the sink and plastering a look of concern on his face. "The Quidditch cup... the final match is on Saturday!"

"Ten o'clock, Potter." Snape said, smiling evilly. "Poor Gryffindor... fourth-place this year..."

Harry chuckled. "Yes, it was dreadful. I couldn't play Quidditch at all. Instead, I sat in the dungeons with Professor Snape while he told me every scrap of information he could about the Death Eaters. Weaknesses, strengths, techniques, favourite spells... Everything that we'd need in the battles ahead."

"Of course, Harry shared this information with me as soon as possible." Hermione continued. "But, I couldn't be in the detention

with him. Instead, I had to go and watch the bloody Quidditch match." She sighed. "The only reason I watched Quidditch matches was so I could go and perv at my husband on a broomstick. Watching the team fumble about without him there was dull as dirt."

"I got back from my detention, heading straight to the common room. Outside the portrait hole, I saw the Fat Lady looking all smug. I spoke the password, and went in..."

Flashback: Gryffindor Common Room, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Saturday, 10th May, 1997

The portrait swung open, and a roar of celebration erupted from the hole behind her. Harry gaped as people began to scream at the sight of him; several hands pulled him into the room.

"We won!" yelled Ron, bounding into sight and brandishing the silver Cup at Harry. "We won! Four hundred and fifty to a hundred and forty! We won!"

Harry looked around; there was Ginny running toward him; she had a hard, blazing look in her face as she threw her arms around him. Before he had time to push her away, (possibly scrubbing his hands with bleach) Ginny kissed him.

Silence fell over the common room, and Harry could almost hear Hermione's temper rising. Not wanting to make a scene (ha! She'd already done that nicely, the little bitch!) Harry leaned back, wanting desperately to go and gargle with a toilet duck.

Harry looked round the common room, seeing people nodding, smiling (Hermione's looking decidedly fake). Ron was grinning widely. This was something he'd wanted to see (well, not see, exactly...) ever since fourth year. Things were definitely proceeding nicely. He nodded at Harry, giving his permission.

Repressing a snort (He didn't need Ron's permission for anything. If he wanted Ginny, and he didn't, he wouldn't bother with getting her

brother's consent.) he gestured at the portrait hole to Ginny. She nodded, smiling widely, as she allowed him to lead her away.

Once outside the portrait hole, Harry casually stunned her, before dropping her off in a broom closet. Hermione appeared a moment later, scowling at the little redhead. A quick Obliviate later, Harry was walking towards the grounds, Hermione in step beside him under her invisibility cloak.

"Little bitch..." She was muttering. "Making a move on my husband... It's wrong, Harry."

"I know." Harry had already cast seven breath-freshening charms, but nothing could get the taste out of his mouth. "Believe me, I want a drink of bleach right about now."

A hand appeared in the middle of nowhere, holding a bottle of Butterbeer. "This might do for a start."

Harry took the bottle, flicking the cap off with his thumb, before draining the whole thing. "Nope, still not enough."

Hermione sighed, her wand appearing through a gap in the cloak and refilling the bottle casually. "Here."

Harry grinned as he saw Ginny flush in the audience. "So, Ginny kissed me in the common room. As far as I was concerned, it was a miracle..."

Ginny perked up, smiling widely. At least, until Harry continued his statement.

"...that Hermione didn't skin her alive right then and there." Harry took his wife's hand. "I was outraged. I'd never expressed even a hint of interest in Ginny Weasley, and here she was, mouth-raping me in the common room, in front of everyone. Personally, I think it was a stunt to make me have no choice in the matter. I wouldn't want to be embarrassed in front of everyone, so I would have to go along with

it." He sighed. "No... I was never interested in Ginny Weasley. At this point, I'd been married for nearly a year, and been in a relationship with Hermione for over five. Ginny wasn't even a blip on the radar."

He didn't bother to look down at the audience. He could feel the seething indignation from the Weasleys all the way up on the stage, and he had no plans to get involved.

"Two... three weeks later, the doll sought me out again." Harry said. "It was carrying another recording. I immediately grabbed Hermione, then an hour later, we made our way up to Dumbledore's office, calling Professors Snape and McGonagall to come along, and setting up a conference call with Remus and Tonks.

"The playback was basically Malfoy cheering and jeering. He'd managed to complete his repairs to the cabinet. We made an immediate plan to sabotage it again, since we wanted a little more time. We were really hoping that we'd be able to get to the end of term before Malfoy could use it. Remus Floo'd up to the school and snuck into the Room of Requirement, cracking three of the support struts, and taking it off-line again. It would take Malfoy another fortnight to have it fixed."

The audience was no unaware of that timescale. Approximately two weeks into June, Dumbledore had been killed.

Harry could see the crowd putting the pieces together. "Might as well get to that night, huh?" He smiled coolly as he saw the crowd nod. "Very well.

"Dumbledore had determined the location of another Horcrux. He'd been training us to find them, so we'd be able to hunt, but since he was still around, he wanted some backup." Harry turned to look over his shoulder. "Had he taken backup the first time, things would have been very different."

"We've had this conversation, my boy." Dumbledore said slowly. "I am truly sorry that I wasn't able to be with you today. You know that."



"Yes, sir. I do." Harry said tenderly, before turning back to the audience. "So, myself and Dumbledore left the school, heading down to Hogsmeade before apparating to Bristol."

"Brighton." Dumbledore corrected.

"Was it?" Harry asked, leaning over his shoulder again. "I thought it was Bristol. No... hang on, Bristol's nowhere near the coast. Sorry. Getting confused." He faced the audience. "We apparated down to Brighton, a section of the shoreline. There was a small island about two hundred metres out. We swam there, entering a sea cave. We had to pay to get in by giving it some blood. Since Professor Dumbledore had a dead hand, he sliced it open and used that blood to gain entrance."

Harry sighed, and took a moment. "While there, we saw that the cave had been radically expanded, and contained an underground lake. At the centre of that lake was a small island, with something small and glowing green on it. As we approached the edge of the lake, Professor Dumbledore told me not to get too close. The lake was filled with Inferi, waiting to protect whatever was on the centre of the lake."

Hermione watched his pause, knowing that even over a year later, this was still a painful memory. She squeezed his hand, nodding at him gently.

"Me and Dumbledore climbed into the boat, which was only designed to take one person. Since I was still underage by about six weeks, the boat wouldn't recognise me as a person, only the Professor. We were ferried across to the lake." Harry swallowed noisily. "While we were travelling across, I asked the Professor why the Inferi weren't attacking us. With a rather dry smile, he told me that Voldemort, who'd set the Inferi there in the first place, wouldn't want to stop people coming to the island."

"Which means that they'd want to stop people leaving the island." Hermione completed smoothly. "He'd want to know who had managed to penetrate his defences like that. That conclusion gave Harry the knowledge that they'd have to fight to get out."

"Once there," Harry carried on, "we got off the boat and had a look around. It was literally a large rock in the middle of the lake. On it was a pedestal, with a tall vase-like cauldron full of a glowing green potion. In the bottom of the cauldron was a golden locket. But how to get the locket from the potion? We couldn't reach in to take it. No, there was a ward in place to stop that. We couldn't shatter the cauldron. We couldn't knock it off the pedestal."

Harry sighed. "There was only one way. Someone had to drink the potion. Dumbledore volunteered. He gave me an explicit order that if he stopped drinking, for whatever reason, I would have to force him to carry on. And I did. After the third goblet, Dumbledore was raving. By the end of the fourth, he couldn't hold it anymore. I..." Harry sniffed. "I had to force another six goblets of that vile shite down this throat. At the end of the tenth goblet, Dumbledore was begging for death."

The portrait of Dumbledore cleared his throat softly. "I am truly sorry for what I asked you, Harry."

"It was necessary." Harry said tonelessly. "You knew that, and I knew that. I just didn't like it."

"I am grateful that your trust in me was sufficient to carry out the task."

Harry smiled warmly at the portrait. "You've never led me wrong, sir. How could I not trust you?" He turned back to the audience. "I grabbed Dumbledore a goblet full of water from the lake. The potion had cursed the goblet so that I couldn't just fill it with water. The instant I touched the water, the Inferi woke up."

"We fought them off, heading back to the boat." Harry said. "At this point, I was practically carrying Dumbledore. Once we got through the cave, we apparated back to Hogsmeade. Madam Rosmerta saw us and came rushing down, telling us that there was a Dark Mark above the Astronomy tower. We grabbed a couple of brooms and flew up."

Harry took a moment. This was becoming more and more difficult. "While we were flying back, Dumbledore told me to put my invisibility

cloak on. Once we landed, he did something that was truly unforgiveable..." He trailed off, needing a few moments to gather his tattered emotions together.

While Harry was recovering, Hermione cleared her throat. "While Harry and Dumbledore were away, myself, Ron, Ginny, Neville and Luna had gathered with several members of the Order so that we could fight, if needed. I had my communicator open to Harry, but very quietly, so I could listen in. I heard him make Dumbledore drink that potion, and I heard the fight out of the cave. There was nothing I could do there." She sighed. "We were watching over the Room of Requirement.

"Malfoy was a lot smarter than any of us gave him credit for. He'd bought a stash of Peruvian Instant Darkness powder from Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes, and he had an artefact called the Hand of Glory, so that he could see through the darkness. He led the Death Eaters through the school, engaging in a running firefight with the Order and us students.

"Me and Luna were on guard outside Professor Snape's office. He told Luna that Professor Flitwick had been injured, and on his way out, told me to be on my guard. It was happening, and he may need to fulfil that blasted Unbreakable Vow. He followed the Death Eaters towards the Astronomy tower."

Harry continued the story. "Once myself and Dumbledore landed on the tower, me still covered by my invisibility cloak, I was hit by a silent Petrification spell by the Professor. The instant that happened, Malfoy burst onto the ramparts, disarming the Professor. By saving my life and hiding me, he'd pretty much cost his own."

"Your life was always worth more than mine, Harry." Dumbledore said tenderly. "Prophecy or not. I was at the end of my life, you are still only at the beginning of yours."

Harry sighed. "Perhaps... Anyway, other Death Eaters came up onto the ramparts..."

Flashback: Astronomy Tower, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Sunday, 15th June, 1997

The four Death Eaters, Amycus and Alecko Carrow, a mysterious figure that Harry had never seen before and Fenrir Greyback, stood behind Draco Malfoy, who was trembling in the cool Scottish air.

"Now, Draco!" The mysterious figure snapped. "Quickly!"

Greyback snarled in annoyed. "If you can't do it, boy, I will!"

Dumbledore's eyes flicked towards the silent corner where Harry was petrified. It is time, Harry. My time.

Harry tried to shake his head. No... please, sir, we can still escape this...

Now it was Dumbledore shaking his head. It is too late for me, my boy. Too late by far. But, I have prepared you for what lies ahead. You know, in your heart, that this is so.

Harry shook his head. Sir... I can't do this alone! You know that!

Dumbledore, for a fraction of a second, smiled. You will not be alone, Harry. Your wife will stand with you against all comers. You know that. I will be with you, in spirit.

"No!" The mystery man snapped, using his wand to blast Greyback back against the wall.

I will ask Severus to complete the action, Harry. Dumbledore said, his eyes locked onto the invisible Harry. Draco has not yet fallen to the darkness. He can still be saved.

It's really not fair on Severus, sir. Harry thought back. Asking him to end your life like that. You know he'll blame himself for it.

"Draco, do it or stand aside so one of us can-" Alecko Carrow stopped as another figure burst onto the scene. It was Severus.

Dumbledore's eyes flicked to the corner where Harry was, getting an imperceptible nod from Snape. Because his Occlumency shields were down, Harry could 'overhear' the conversation between the two men.

Sweet Merlin, what happened? Snape sent angrily.

I managed to retrieve another Horcrux. I had to drink a slow poison, though. Dumbledore sent back. Harry is in the corner. Please protect him, Severus.

Again that imperceptible nod. What is your command, sir?

"We've got a problem, Snape." Amycus snapped. "The boy doesn't seem able-"

"Severus..." Dumbledore croaked piteously. It is my time, Severus. You must end it.

Revulsion was etched onto Snape's face as he took in the request. Inside his mind, he was screaming. No! Don't make me do this!

You must. There is no other choice, Severus. "Severus... please..."

Again, for a moment, Dumbledore looked at Harry. Goodbye, my boy.

I will carry out the mission. I know what you ask of me, sir. I will stand, and I will fight. I accept the sacrifice. Harry paused for a moment. I love you, sir. You've been a good mentor, guide and friend. I'll miss you... Grandpappy Firebird.

Snape's revulsion was escalated as he raised his wand. "Avada Kedavra!"

The green light rocketed towards the prone Dumbledore, who, thanks to Harry's comment, had the slightest smile on his face. Harry was forced to watch as Dumbledore was blasted into the air, and for a moment, he was motionless over a long drop. Then gravity

reasserted it's hold, sending him tumbling from the ramparts to the field below.

There was a pause, as though the universe was pondering what had happened and was deciding on a course of action. "Out of here, go!" Snape snapped, sending the four Death Eaters and Malfoy through the door. He closed and locked it, looking over at Harry's prone position.

Since Dumbledore was dead, the Petrification was released. Harry pulled off the cloak, unmindful of the tears streaming down his face. He did notice the tears in Snape's eyes. Without a thought, he pulled the Potions Master into a hug, letting him know that he understood. And he did.

Snape clung to Harry like a lifeline. "I... I wish I hadn't had to do that."

"I know." Harry said. "It was necessary. And it was Dumbledore's wish. You released him, Sev. You know that."

"I killed a great man, just to maintain my cover with terrorists and murderers." He snapped, before sighing. "You should chase me out, you know."

Harry nodded, squeezing once before letting go. "You've got your communicator, sir. Let me know what you can."

"I will." Snape promised solemnly. "Make sure you're angry when you chase me. More believable."

"I am angry." Harry said. "If I see Malfoy again, he'll die."

"It's time to start running." Snape said, releasing the lock of the door. "Good luck, Harry Potter."

"And to you, Severus Snape." Harry bowed slightly, then gestured to the door. Harry gave him five seconds, then roared in anger and began the chase.

Harry slumped in his chair. "So... now you all know. While Severus Snape did deliver the killing blow to Albus Dumbledore, he did not murder him. He did it to save Draco Malfoy from becoming a murderer. He did it to end an old man's suffering. He did it so that the Light would win. And he did it... because a friend asked him to." He turned to look at Snape's portrait, unsurprised to see tears in the painted eyes.

"I wish I hadn't." Snape whispered. "I wish that I had never entered into that bloody vow."

Dumbledore's portrait cleared his throat. "Now, my boy, we've talked about this. I don't blame you for those actions. You gave a dying man some dignity. I chose my own way out. I have no complaints with your actions."

Harry sighed, looking at the other portraits. His mother and father had already heard about the actions, and he knew that they didn't agree with the plot, but could certainly understand it. Padfoot had winced in sympathy for Severus when he heard about it, but he agreed. It was a tactically sound plan.

In the communications mirror, a wail sounded, Tonks vanishing from the image for a moment. Remus was looking at something 'off-camera', licking his lips hungrily.

"Remus?" Harry called out. "Stop staring at your wife's breasts, please."

Remus blushed and looked back, but snuck a final peek before turning back to the mirror. "Sorry."

"No, you're not." Harry replied, grinning at his mentor, before turning back to the audience. "The fallout from that fight is well known. I chased the Death Eaters off the grounds of the school, helping Hagrid put his house out. We got back, and Ginny Weasley escorted me to the Hospital Wing. I was exhausted and angry, but utterly useless at that moment. There wasn't anything I could do. All I wanted was to go to bed and hug my wife."

Hermione held his hand tightly. "Me and Remus filled in Harry about what had happened during the fight, and I took my husband to bed, giving him the comfort he desperately needed. We both cried that night. Cried for Albus, and cried for Severus. God alone knows what he was going through as he left the school."

"Hell." Severus spoke up. "Utter hell."

"Bill Weasley had been injured in the fight with Greyback, receiving a face full of cursed slashes." Harry said. "Fleur, though, bless her little cotton socks, knew that she was in love, and a hankering for rare steak wouldn't change the man inside. Remus and Tonks had a big argument."

Remus smiled. "What better way to admit our relationship?"

"It was nearly two years old!" James' portrait said. "You should have had the guts to stand up before then, Moony."

Tonks reappeared in the mirror, holding a freshly changed and fed Teddy. "Hey, what better way to propose than that?" She grinned. "I swear, we humped for days afterwards. The stamina of a werewolf with the possibilities of a Metamorphagus. It was an epic shag."

Harry grinned at the wrinkled noses in the audience, all pureblood bigots. Percy Weasley was definitely chief among them.

"While I was heading to bed, I opened the locket. I was hoping that our mission hadn't been in vain. Unfortunately, it was. The locket wasn't a Horcrux. It was a fake. Someone had already been there and stolen the real locket. I admit; I was pissed off. After all that work, it was a bloody fake! The only lead we had was a note inside the locket, signed with the initials 'RAB'."

In the portraits behind the couple, Sirius remained silent. He knew the truth, even though it was far too late to do anything about it.

"Dumbledore's funeral was one of the biggest in the Wizarding world's history. Unfortunately, I couldn't stand up and give a eulogy. We still didn't know who all the Death Eaters or sympathisers were,



and the chances of letting slip information was too great. It's a shame, too; I had a cracking speech prepared."

"Before we left for the summer, Ginny approached Harry." Hermione said. "I was keeping my eye on her. Fortunately for my sanity, and Ginny's continuing good health, Harry 'broke up' with her, to 'protect' her. Ron was trying to hug me. Even at a bloody funeral, he was trying to make a move. I nearly used my wedding ring as a knuckle-duster on the gormless prat."

"One thing I found truly indicative of the 'relationship' with Ginny was what she said to me as I 'broke up' with her." Harry said. "She said 'I knew you wouldn't be happy unless you were fighting Voldemort. Maybe that's why I like you so much'. Doesn't that tell you something?"

"It tells me that Ginny had no interest in 'Just Harry'. She wanted 'Harry Potter: The Boy-Who-Lived'. 'Harry the Hero'." She sighed. "'Harry the Rich and Famous Wizard'. She didn't want the guy who had perpetually scruffy hair. The guy who'd sit on the couch and scratch his belly when he was hungry. The guy who could..." She trailed off, blushing. "Well, the guy who could love very well. She didn't want that. She wanted front page of the Daily Prophet. She wanted the bugles, battles and bags of glory. In short, she wanted everything that Harry hated."

"Unlike my wife, of course," Harry said, lifting her hand and kissing the back of it, "who found my hair to be endlessly amusing. Who sniggered whenever I scratched my belly." His grin grew wider. "The one who enjoyed my ministrations. We were a team. And we knew the worst was yet to come."

"Before we took the train back, Minister Scrimgeour approached me, telling me that the situation had changed, and he wanted to know what was going on. He still wanted me to become the Ministry's poster boy, and even offered a couple of Aurors for protection. Course, I could easily mop up a pair of Aurors, so they were no use. I told him where to get off, and walked away. I had to go back to the Dursleys one more time. But, it was only until my birthday. Then the

blood protections would break, and I'd be classified as an adult. As an adult, I no longer had to stay with those bastards."

"Ron told us that we'd have to go to the Burrow for Bill and Fleur's wedding, but that wasn't a problem for us, really. We didn't mind, since back then, we liked Bill and Fleur. He said he'd come with us on our quest, though. Personally, I think it was because he wanted to make sure we didn't run off and do something he didn't approve of, and he could keep dosing up with Amortentia. Didn't matter to us. We had tasks to do in the summer, and more research to carry out." Hermione said.

Harry summed up the year. "The hardest mission was ahead of us. We were on our own, now. No Dumbledore to back us up. No ancient castle to retreat to. No support from the Ministry. It was myself and Hermione, Remus, Tonks, Professor McGonagall and Severus Snape versus the world. The Darkness had definitely struck a blow to the Light, and we were certainly down, but we weren't out yet. There was still a little fight left in us. And we were going to take that fight to Voldemort. But none of us could expect where our journey would take us."

## - CHAPTER SEVEN -

School Year: 1997-1998... AWOL

The Great Hall, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Saturday, 1st August, 1998

Harry was taking a few moments to gather himself, his wife doing the same next to him. While he was thinking, he called out to the audience, "Does anyone have any questions regarding what we've revealed so far?"

Rita Skeeter stood up, well aware that she was on very rocky ground with the magical powerhouses on the stage. "You mentioned the word 'Horcrux' several times, and said in a very vague form what they did. Would you be able to clarify what these are?"

Hermione nodded, leaning forward in her chair. "In very basic terms, a Horcrux is a torn-off piece of soul. By keeping it separate from the body, it anchors the individual in question to the Earth. They cannot be killed. Voldemort had six of these evil creations. In total, he actually made seven, but after Harry destroyed one in 1993, Voldemort decided to make another. At the end of our sixth year, we didn't know for certain what these were. We had speculations, but nothing else."

"May I ask what you thought the objects were?" Skeeter asked politely.

"As we stated, Voldemort considered Hogwarts his home, not to mention another untapped source of magic. Founders' relics were what he wanted. Now, we told you earlier that during the lessons with Professor Dumbledore, we'd researched the relics. Slytherin only had two relics; the locket and the ring that had been in the possession of the Gaunts. The ring had been destroyed by Dumbledore. The Slytherin connection was reinforced by the diary that Ginny Weasley was corrupted by in her first year, since it allowed her to speak Parseltongue."

Skeeter nodded, her quill scribbling away next to her.

"There was only one relic from Helga Hufflepuff, and that was her goblet. That was in the possession of Hepzibah Smith, and was stolen by Tom Riddle in the early fifties. Her house elf was blamed for the crime. Smith had also bought the locket from Borgin and Burkes, and was something else that Voldemort coveted.

"Ravenclaw had three relics, one of which was confirmed destroyed in the Grindelwald war. Her battlestaff. The other two relics were her Battle-Bow, which had been held by a collector since 1898, and was under lock and key the entire time. The other was her diadem, which had gone missing centuries ago.

"Finally, Gryffindor. With the possible exception of the Sorting Hat, which has been proclaimed as Gryffindor's work, the only relic is his sword. The sword chose Harry back in '93, but it will accept requests by another, provided those requests are worthy. And, those requests have to be made through the Sorting Hat."

Skeeter blinked. "That seems... odd. A sword choosing it's wielder, I mean."

"The wand chooses the wizard, Mr. Potter." Harry said, in a rough approximation of Mr. Ollivander. "If a piece of wood with a bit of dead animal inside can choose it's wielder, why not a magical blade?"

"Good point." Skeeter admitted. "And the sword was not one of these 'Horcruxes'?"

"No." Hermione said. "The sword was, in fact, about the only easy way to destroy a Horcrux. Thanks to the 'adventure' in the Chamber of Secrets, the sword possessed the power of Basilisk venom. But, that's later."

Skeeter was counting on her fingers. "Wait a moment. The ring, the locket, the goblet, the bow, the diadem and the diary... that's only six in total. You said he made seven."

"Correct." Hermione said slowly. "But, the Battle-Bow was never a Horcrux. As we said, it had been held by a collector for almost a century, and had never been taken. We even wrote to the owner, who confirmed that it was intact and untouched. No, there were more Horcruxes. We'll come to those shortly, though."

Skeeter nodded and sat down.

Harry looked at Hermione. "I'm ready to continue. You?" She nodded, prompting Harry to look back at the audience. "So, I returned back to Privet Drive, while Hermione went with her parents. However, we were now becoming desperate with regards to our foci. Our wands simply weren't enough in a combat situation. We were both running the very real risk of the wands exploding. So, one thing we did was gather books, wood and suitable core materials. I started sorting through my various ingredients and components in the Dursleys' cellar during that last summer.

"Now, one thing that's not commonly known is that you cannot use metal when creating a magical focus. Those rumours about 'cold iron' impeding magic are entirely true. If you use a metal file or a drill bit on a wand, you'll make the wood become magically nonreactive, making it pointless. So, we had to wait until we could get appropriate wood and tools.

"Next, we had to pick items that we knew would be able to work together, and we also had to use powerful items. Ollivander uses phoenix feathers, unicorn tail hairs and dragon heartstrings. Those substances, while certainly powerful, don't, as a rule, play nice with each other in a magical focus. Wands are generally too small to be multi-cored. Staffs were our only choice."

Hermione cleared her throat. "Since we'd been researching this on and off for almost a year, we'd collected quite a few useful samples. Fawkes had donated two tail feathers for us, one each, and two full vials of his tears. Healers' wands are bathed in phoenix tears, it helps them cast medical spells."

"So, we had our first two components, good for light magic and healing spells. For combat spells, we thought about something that

had exceptional prowess in battle. Initially, we considered dragon heartstring, but then we realised that dragons are only combat-effective because of their immense size and magical resistance. No, they were no good." Harry said. "So, we looked a little closer to home... didn't we, Mr. Moony?" He turned and looked in the communication mirror.

"I'm still amazed Moony let you." Remus said. "Even with Wolfsbane, I don't like to be plucked."

Hermione smiled at the crowd. "Werewolf hair. A single strand each. Then we asked a half-giant of our acquaintance, who gave us a hair and a small blood-sample. Hagrid's blood in our staves gives us an almost twenty percent in a boost to the spells cast, and gives us exceptionally strong shielding charms."

"For a boost in transfiguration spells, we asked a Metamorph of our acquaintance."

Tonks blushed in the mirror, but kept silent.

"Because of her powers, Tonks doesn't actually have hair, as such. Her body is basically pure transfiguration magic. A hair of hers gave us some excellent transfiguration help." Harry turned to the mirror and winked, before turning back. "Hagrid was able to supply us with some other ingredients, thanks to his work in the Forbidden Forest. Because the unicorns often leave hair behind in the bushes as they run, we were able to get some good samples there."

Now it was Hermione's turn to blush. "I went into the Forest to speak to a unicorn. According to myth, they only like virgins, and I wasn't one anymore. That's not true. What they like is pure people, and both myself and Harry were that. I was gifted with a few drops of freely given blood."

The crowd gasped. Unicorn's blood could keep anyone alive, even if they were an inch from death. That was known. But it would curse the person who had slain the unicorn to take the blood. However, there was one ancient legend, about a person being raised from the dead

by having freely-given unicorn's blood administered. It was that powerful.

"There were other branches of magic that would be gained by having an additional core." Harry said. "Bowtruckles are guardians of trees. Hagrid managed to convince one to give up two of its claws, and he managed to pluck an Augury, giving us a feather each. That was Herbology and nature magic all sorted. We were thinking about adding components from the basilisk, but they can only be used for 'Dark' magic. We didn't include those."

"The last two components in our staves are Re'em blood, which was hellishly expensive in the Apothecary in Diagon Alley, and Demiguise fur, which was probably even more expensive. Still, I'm married to one of the richest men in the Wizarding world, and our quest was a noble one. The money wasn't an issue. And we now had everything we could think of. All we needed was the wood for the staves, and the runes, and we'd be set." Hermione concluded. "But, we'll come back to those later."

"Yes." Harry said. "While interesting, it's not tremendously relevant to the tale. They do play a part, but not until the end of our story. So, I was at the Dursleys. Hermione told me that there was a plan to safely extract me, but they couldn't reveal it until the day they came. I had to spend a huge portion of time persuading the Dursleys to leave by the time my birthday rolled round. Finally, they agreed and two members of the Order of the Phoenix turned up to escort them away."

"The plan for escaping Privet Drive was pretty basic." Hermione said. "A group of us arrived at the Dursleys and explained that we couldn't Portkey away, even though Harry had been sneaking out to my place and back, couldn't apparate since Harry was still officially underage, and Pius Thicknesse, the replacement Director of the DMLE had made it an imprisonable offence to hook Harry's house up to the Floo network."

Harry stared at Percy. "Tell me, Minion Weatherby... why do you think that Thicknesse implemented these absurd rules?"

Percy didn't flinch. "According to the reports in the Ministry, it was to make certain that no-one was able to penetrate your home and kidnap you. It was done for your safety, and you would do well to remember that."

Harry and Hermione roared with laughter. "What utter bollocks!" Harry spat contemptuously. "It was done with the sole purpose of making it impossible for me to leave before the Blood wards came down. In short, it was meant to work in Voldemort's favour, not mine. So, we were left with only one recourse: flying. The plan was simple: The Seven Potters. Six people would take a dose of Polyjuice with my hair in it, transform into a version of me and be escorted away by a member of the Order. Misdirection, plain and simple."

Hermione smiled warmly. "I was one of those who'd be transformed into a fake Harry. Let me just say, it felt very odd to be Harry." She smirked at him. "Very odd to be on the other side of that equation."

Rolling his eyes, Harry just shook his head. "Alastor Moody, may he rest in peace, also told me something very curious. He told me about 'the trace', which apparently is how the Ministry of Magic tracks underage magic. Weasley, any comment?"

Percy frowned for a moment. "What exactly are you asking?"

"Is the trace real?"

"Of course." Percy sounded mildly offended by the question.

"Well, it's utter bollocks, Percy. There's no such thing as 'the trace'. It's all a fabrication from the Ministry. The truth of tracking underage magic is actually done by the registration book. As soon as a magical person is born, their name is written in the book. There are two copies of the Registrar. One is held here at Hogwarts. The other is held by the Ministry. As soon as a magical person is detected, a series of detection wards are placed by Ministry warders to notify the Ministry of any instances of underage magic. That's how, when Dobby cast that spell in my second year, that the Ministry noticed it. If there truly was some kind of 'Trace', it would never have happened. So, why was Moody telling me about something that doesn't exist?"



Percy said nothing.

"Could it perhaps be that the Ministry had placed a special charm on my husband, Mr. Weasley?" Hermione asked, ice in her tone. "Perhaps they felt the need to hold him to a higher standard than anyone else, especially considering that he was so politically inconvenient?" Hermione glared at Percy for a moment, before shaking her head. "It doesn't matter anymore, does it?"

"So, we split up." Harry said. "I was with Hagrid on the back of Sirius' motorbike. Moody had six cages, with stuffed owls in them for effect. Of course, I had no desire to subject Hedwig to a mad dash across the country in her cage. Hell, no. Instead, I'd already released her, and Moody made me another stuffed owl. Hedwig was gone and safe." (1)

"During that frenzied escape, a huge group of Death Eaters chased after all seven Harry Potters. However, while I was fighting my way to freedom, which oddly enough, never generated a letter from the Improper Use of Magic Office, I showed my hand by using an Expelliarmus instead of a deadly spell. Voldemort came, attacking us. Hagrid tried to outrun him, but we were simply outclassed. My wand fought on it's own, sending a blast of golden flames at Voldemort, taking him out of the fight. Unfortunately, the motorbike had taken heavy damage during the fighting and the sidecar, where I was sitting, sheared off. My bag was in there, my owl cage and my broom."

"Not quite, dear." Hermione said. "The Firebolt from Sirius was at my place, along with my own. I'd already packed them away for our field trip. What he had was a transfigured broom, like the one Dee had confiscated during his fifth year. Why take the chance of having such a precious gift destroyed? No, it was safe. Harry managed to grab his bag before the sidecar fell, and Hagrid hoisted him off the bike. When Harry told me about that, I had the silliest image of Terminator 2." She looked at the blank expressions on the audiences' faces. "Muggle thing. Never mind."

"While the sidecar was falling to the ground, I cast a Confringo curse, making it explode and giving us some cover as we ran. Fortunately,

we were able to make it to the Tonks house before the bike crapped out on us. We portkeyed to the Burrow and we were safe."

"Eventually, most of us made it there safe and sound. George Weasley had lost an ear to Snape's Sectusempra, but other than that, we were okay."

Snape cleared his throat. "I had to make it believable, didn't I? Plus, it was a Weasley."

Harry winced at that last comment, but said nothing. "Eventually, most people made it back. Unfortunately, Mad-Eye Moody fell in battle." Harry stood, raising his nearly-empty glass of Butterbeer. "Moody!" He roared, swallowing the drink. He sat back down, taking his wife's hand again.

"However, things at the Burrow were... uncomfortable. It was while we were packing that we began to get an idea of just how uncomfortable..."

Flashback: The Burrow, Ottery St. Catchpole, Devonshire  
Tuesday, 29th July, 1997

Harry sighed as he looked at the immense collection of books that he and Hermione had obtained over the last six years. He knew they couldn't take them with him. He'd need some kind of... of dimensionally transcendental space to carry them all. They'd have to leave some behind. But which ones? What the hell books do you take with you when you're being chased by a homicidal madman and his band of merry masked lunatics?

Hermione had already begun sorting through them, leaving behind the more obviously useless tomes. Ron's collection of Gilderoy Lockhart books had been happily banished to the bottom of the wardrobe (since their copies had fuelled a barbecue four years ago... and that was a very enjoyable bonfire.) The early Herbology textbooks would be left behind, as would Ron's entire collection of Quidditch books. Everything that they'd received from Dumbledore (which was most of his private collection) had been packed already, as well as a couple of very dark books from the Restriction Section.

The entire Black Family library had been transmuted into a single indexed book, weighing nearly five kilos, but containing over two hundred books. That would be useful.

Other subjects, the early potions, charms and transfiguration textbooks, the OWL-level Arithmancy book and everything they had on Astronomy would also be left behind in Harry's trunk. The Ancient Runes books would be coming with them, since they had no idea if they'd need anything on wards or breaking them.

The other subjects they'd studied, the non-curriculum subjects, had already been packed, since neither Harry nor Hermione had any inclination to let the Weasleys see the truth depth of their knowledge or skills.

Hermione came into the room, scowling lightly, Crookshanks hot on her heels.

"Problem?" Harry asked, looking up at his wife with concern.

"Ron." Hermione said in answer. And really, what more did she need to say?

"What did he do this time?" Harry asked, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"He was telling me that we shouldn't let this mission get in the way of our relationship." Hermione said bitterly. "He was saying that maybe it would be better if we were to stay behind and let the Order take care of the mission."

Harry chuckled. "So, he's afraid."

"That's no excuse, Harry." Hermione said sternly. "I'm afraid and I'm not gonna let that stop me. I said I'd stand with you. Everything that I am, remember?"

Harry grinned goofily. "Yeah, I remember."

She smirked at the silly expression on his face. "Stop grinning, you fool. You'll give the game away." After Harry had sobered up, Hermione looked back at the books. "Molly's still trying it, you know."

Harry sighed. He'd been cornered by the Weasley matriarch on several occasions, some of them rather obscure, in the hope of making him spill his secrets. "What did she try this time? Did she burst into tears yet?"

"No, that was last time." Hermione said with a sigh.

Ron came bustling into the bedroom, staring at Harry sitting entirely too close to Hermione for his comfort. "So, how's it going?" He said in a fake jaunty voice.

"It's fine, Ron." Hermione said, getting back to sorting out the books, Crookshanks working his way around the pile. "Any news on Mad-Eye yet?"

"No, nothing yet." Ron said with a sigh. "Remus and Bill both went out to look for him, but they couldn't find him. The Death Eaters probably cleared up after themselves."

Harry glanced at Hermione, finding that comment accurate, but in pretty bad taste. "Possibly. I mean... they transfigured old Crouch into a bone, didn't they?"

"Don't!" Hermione winked at Harry before she burst into fake tears. He'd seen her crying at Dumbledore's funeral, and knew fake from real.

Ron bolted from his bed, aiming to get to Hermione and comfort her. He pulled a dirty rag from his pocket, cleaning it with a Tergeo, before handing it to Hermione. He knelt down next to her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

Suppressing a growl, Harry watched the scene coolly. "You know what Mad-Eye would be shouting if he were here." He said in a voice of ice.

"'Constant Vigilance'." Ron quoted.

No, he'd be telling you to get the fuck away from my wife, Weasley! Harry snarled mentally, nodding slowly. "Yeah. Let's practice a little of that while we sort through the rest of these books. Ron, I think I saw one of the Arithmancy books down in the living room. Could you grab that, mate?"

Ron didn't even look up. "Why don't you get it?"

Confundus! Harry cast, his wand flashing into his hand. The spell hit Ron square in the back. "So, it's by the fireplace."

Nodding blankly, Ron stood up, stumbling to the door.

"Harry." Hermione said sternly, before looking up at him. "Thanks, Harry. I don't like him that close to me."

"I know." Harry sighed. "But, we have to make it believable. We have to keep up the fucking charade until the mission's over."

"Language, Harry." Hermione said. "I still hate it, though. I hate being here. I hate the fact that Ron's using cheesy moves from a bloody book about how to woo me. Does he think that I'll be impressed by him studying? Enough to excuse the fact? Gormless wanker."

Harry chuckled. "I know. It's tacky, isn't it? Anyway, I don't think... shite, he's coming back." As Ron entered the room, Harry skilfully changed the subject. "So, they're both safe, then?"

Hermione instantly knew what he was talking about. "Yes. They've been conditioned."

Ron grimaced as he realised what they were talking about. "I know it's painful, Hermione." He said supportively. Or what he thought was supportively, anyway.

Grimacing, Hermione nodded. The truth of the matter was, Daniel and Emma Granger had indeed been moved to Australia. Hermione had loaded them onto the plane herself... with her husband at her

side. The foursome had flown to Australia, where Hermione had set up a set of mental shields over the couple. If Voldemort or the Death Eaters attempted to read their minds for information about Harry or Hermione, or even administered any magical substance or spell, a piece of conditioning would kick in.

All knowledge of Hermione Potter, Harry Potter, Hogwarts and magic would be suppressed, leaving a pair of fake personalities in control of the bodies. Wendell and Monica Wilkins would be born of Daniel and Emma Granger, with no knowledge of a daughter. Neither Dan nor Emma had wanted to go along with the idea, but a visit from Professor McGonagall, Remus and Tonks had them sufficiently informed. Neither of them wanted Hermione to go, but they never said a word. They knew they couldn't stop her. She'd agreed to stand by Harry, and by Merlin, she would!

Her parents protected and safe, Hermione had flown back to England while Harry used the Portkey function on his communicator to head straight back to Privet Drive. The mission was carried out perfectly, and no-one was any the wiser.

Ron sighed. "We'll get them back. You'll see."

Hermione nodded. "Thanks, Ron." She looked at Harry, who nodded, making her feel much better.

Harry smiled at Ron's angry look. "Yes. We would get her parents back. Safe and sound. And they are, if anyone's interested. Back at home. They enjoyed their sojourn to Oz, but they're glad to be back."

Hermione took over the story. "Molly was still getting in the bloody way of our planning. She kept giving us chores, hoping that if we were all kept busy and away from each other, we wouldn't be able to plan our mission."

"Of course, the great Hermione Potter would never let anything so insignificant as chores get in the way of her planning." Harry said, smiling as he said her name. Her real name. "My good wife had packed an emergency bag, which contained pretty much everything we'd need. We had the tent that we'd used for the Quidditch World

Cup back in '94, all packed and ready. We had food, supplies and various other necessities. We were about as ready as we could be for a long term field assignment."

Hermione leaned over the side of her chair, grabbing a bottle of Butterbeer from the cooler she'd stashed there earlier, passing it over to Harry before she grabbed another one for herself. "So, Harry's birthday was next."

"I woke up on the 31st, and I was giddy. I could do magic, whenever I wanted, however I wanted! It was brilliant. I admit I was a big kid and played with everything. Then, Ron handed me my birthday present. A book. Ron Weasley had bought me a book!" Harry pretended to swoon for a moment. "Of course, when I opened it, I was very disappointed. It was my own copy of Twelve Fail-Safe Ways to Charms Witches. And personally, I thought this was in really bad taste. I mean... as far as he was concerned, I was into his sister. And he was giving me a book on wooing witches?"

"I got a couple of useful presents. A Sneakoscope from Hermione, an enchanted razor from Bill and Fleur, which was nice, 'cause my Mach 3 was dying, and I didn't need to replace it now. The Weasleys gave me a fob watch, since it's apparently a family custom. I kept that in my trunk. I had no desire to damage it, and I knew that the mission would be hazardous.

"Later on, at my birthday party, Hagrid gave me a moleskin bag. The great thing about a moleskin bag is that only the owner can take anything out of it. So, my Firebolt, my invisibility cloak, the Marauders' map, a number of my books, all were put into this bag, so that if something were to happen and we lost Hermione's emergency bag, we wouldn't be out of it. I also had a bundle of cash in there, just in case we needed it."

"My seventeenth birthday was curious for two reasons; Ginny and Scrimgeour. While I was taking my presents up to my room, Ginny asked to speak to me..."

Flashback: The Burrow, Ottery St. Catchpole, Devonshire  
Thursday, 31st July, 1997 - 10:12

"Harry, will you come in here for a moment?" Ginny asked, standing in her bedroom doorway.

Harry could almost feel his wife's eyes narrow at the request, but she said nothing. She took the presents out of Harry's arms and nodded slightly, the message that she had his back if he needed it. With an inaudible sigh, Harry stepped into Ginny's bedroom, swallowing nervously when she shut the door firmly.

"Happy seventeenth." Ginny said softly.

"Thanks." Harry replied, looking round the room. At least Ginny had better taste in decorations than Ron did. Instead of the migraine-inducing orange of Chudley Cannons posters, she had the deep purple of the Holyhead Harpies. It made the room seem much more soothing... which wasn't really doing anything for him at the moment. He gestured to the window. "Nice view."

Ginny ignored him, controlling the flash of irritation she felt at his casual dismissal of her. "I couldn't think what to get you for a present." She said finally. "So, I pondered what I could give you to remind you of me."

Please say she's not gonna try and shag me. Harry thought, unconsciously taking a small step back. "You didn't have to get me anything, Ginny." Although, you still seem to think that I should get you something.

"I didn't know what would be useful to you on your... quest." She said. "Obviously, it can't be too big, 'cause you wouldn't be able to take it with you."

Probably wouldn't want to, either. "Ginny, it's fine. I... I appreciate the thought." I'm never gonna get into heaven the amount of lying I've been doing lately.

She took a step closer to him, making his palms sweaty. Hermione, dearest... I need you!



"I wanted to make sure that you wouldn't forget me while you're gone."

No chance of that. You've been stalking me for years. I still have nightmares about you. "I don't think I could forget you, Ginny." And I've tried, believe me.

She stepped closer, wrapping her arms around his neck. "I don't want you to find someone else while you're away. I want you to come back to me, Harry." She leaned up and kissed him. Unable to control himself, he pushed her back, spitting on the floor. His wand was in hand and a memory charm cast before he blinked. Ron opened the door, seeing his sister dazed and blinking and immediately leapt to the right conclusion. Fortunately, Hermione was directly behind him, casting another memory charm.

"Ron, you walked in on Harry and Ginny..." Hermione barely contained the urge to gag, "kissing passionately. As soon as they saw you, they sprang apart, embarrassed. Ginny, you and Harry enjoyed a very passionate snog, but you're bloody annoyed at Ron for breaking it up." Hermione clicked her fingers, then suppressed a grin when Ginny glared coldly at her brother.

"Ron!"

Harry took the chance to get the hell out of dodge while Ginny began to berate her brother. While they were bickering, Harry headed straight to the bathroom, taking the toothbrush Hermione offered him and beginning to scrub his mouth out.

Harry had to stop grinning as Molly, Ron and Ginny all glared at him on the stage. He wasn't fazed by their annoyance at all. After all, he'd just completed his mission. There probably wasn't a wizard alive who could take him. The only person who had a chance was sitting beside him, and would never raise a wand to him in anger.

"Later in the day, during my birthday dinner, the Minister of Magic turned up. And that was curious..."

Flashback: The Burrow, Ottery St. Catchpole, Devonshire

Thursday, 31st July, 1997 - 17:51

Harry led the procession into the living room, Scrimgeour stomping in after them. Harry sat on the couch, Hermione right by his side, leaving Ron and Scrimgeour to take an armchair each. Harry noticed the glare that Ron gave them, but ignored it for the moment. Right now, he had to deal with someone who was a lot more threatening than an irate redhead.

Scrimgeour took a moment to stare at the three, hoping that he could unnerve them. It worked well on the Weasley kid, but both Potter and Granger simply stared back, completely unimpressed. "I am here, as I'm sure you know, because of Albus Dumbledore's will."

Harry shook his head. "I didn't know that, actually, Minister. Forgive me for seeming rude, but what does Dumbledore's will have to do with any of us? I'd imagine everything he has either went to the school or to his brother."

"You'd think that, Mr. Potter." Scrimgeour said, enjoying being able to tell the brat he was wrong. "And you'd be correct for the most part. However, Dumbledore left a bequest for the three of you."

Harry's eyebrow shot up. "Dumbledore left us something? Why?" Of course, Dumbledore had already passed across most of the things he wanted to. He and Hermione had been the recipients of all of valuable magical books, leaving only the routine books to be donated to the school.

"I was hoping you could tell me, Potter." Scrimgeour said. "Why would Dumbledore leave you something?"

"I don't... hang on. Why are we only being told about this now?" Harry asked. "He died almost six weeks ago. His will should have been read within a fortnight. What have you been doing for the last month?"

Scrimgeour's eyes narrowed. "If you'd stop interrupting and answer my questions, I'd tell you." He snapped.

"It's obvious, Harry." Hermione said bitterly. "They wanted a chance to pick through whatever he left us. To ignore common decency and interfere in things they have no right to look at."

"Watch your mouth!" Scrimgeour snapped. "The Ministry has the right to inspect anything of this nature. The Decree for Justifiable Confiscation-"

"Has been abused!" Hermione snapped. "You have no right to invoke the decree for Dumbledore. That Decree was designed to stop Dark artefacts being passed on to people. It does not give the Ministry carte blanche to interfere!"

"You say potato..." Scrimgeour said, dismissing Hermione's entirely valid protests as irrelevant. "Mr. Weasley, I shall begin with you." He reached into his pocket, pulling out Dumbledore's Deluminator. "This was your bequest." He handed it across. "Do you know why Dumbledore left that to you? It's a highly valuable piece of equipment. Almost certainly one of Dumbledore's inventions. Why would he leave this to you?"

Harry caught Hermione's eye, and winced slightly. He knew why. He knew that it contained a tracking signal. Dumbledore had told him about it at the end of first year, about how it was one of the tools Dumbledore used to keep him safe. Although he agreed with it in principal, he had no desire to have the device in Ron's hands.

"I don't know." Ron said. "I mean... I know what it does, but I don't know why he'd give it to me."

"Dumbledore was the headmaster of Hogwarts for over forty years, Mr. Weasley. He was a teacher for nearly twenty years before that. Why do you think he left that item to you, when you three were the only people listed by name?"

Ron just shrugged. "I don't know, Minister."

Scrimgeour scowled, before turning to Hermione. "For you, he left a copy of The Tales of Beedle the Bard."

"A book?" Hermione's face lit up. "He left me a book? Cool!"

With another scowl, Scrimgeour passed the battered tome over. Hermione took it and opened the cover, reading the contents page, before she turned to the first chapter.

"Why do you think Dumbledore left that to you, Miss Granger?" Scrimgeour demanded, eyeing Hermione closely.

"Because I'm a bookworm, Minister." Hermione said, not looking up. "He must have known that I hadn't read this one." She smiled warmly at him, her eyes twinkling in an oh-so-familiar manner. "I'll certainly enjoy this, sir. Thanks for delivering it." She oozed sarcasm, which wasn't lost on Harry or the Minister.

"Did you ever discuss codes or any means of passing secret messages?" Scrimgeour demanded.

"No, sir. Never." Hermione said innocently. And it was true; Professor Snape had taught them that useful little skill, with Tonks adding her two pence worth.

Scrimgeour grunted before turning to Harry. "There's two things for you, Potter. The first is this." He reached into a pocket, pulling out a small golden ball, about the size of a walnut. "In his will, he said, 'I leave the snitch he caught in his first Quidditch match at Hogwarts, as a reminder of the rewards of perseverance and skill'."

Harry smiled. "Cool! I was wondering what happened to that. I read in Quidditch through the Ages that seekers get to keep the snitches they catch. I always wondered why I never got that one."

"Why did Dumbledore leave you this snitch?" Scrimgeour asked angrily. This meeting was not going the way he wanted it to.

Harry blinked. "Didn't he say in the will? 'A reminder of the rewards of perseverance and skill'." He looked at Hermione. "That's what the Minister just told us, isn't it?"

"Yep."

"You think this is just a keepsake?"

Harry frowned. "What else could it be? It's a snitch. As far as I know, it's just a snitch." He paused, looking suspicious. "Do you think it could be something else, Minister?"

"I'm the one asking the questions!" Scrimgeour roared. "And you will answer mine, boy!"

"Ah-ah." Harry said patronisingly. "I'm of-age now. You have to call me 'man'. Not boy."

Scrimgeour ignored the rebuke. "I noticed your birthday cake is in the shape of a snitch. Coincidence?"

Harry chuckled, and looked at Hermione and Ron. "Aren't I a bit of a Quidditch buff?" Both Ron and Hermione nodded. "Seeker?" More nods. "And wasn't I something like the youngest seeker in a century?" Again, they nodded. Harry turned back to the Minister. "I really don't know, Minister. Personally, I think it's some kind of secret code."

"It could be." Scrimgeour said thoughtfully. "You know, a snitch is just big enough to hold a small item, Potter. Is Dumbledore passing something to you?"

"Other than the snitch, not that I'm aware of." Harry said thoughtfully. "Except he wants me to remember the rewards of perseverance and skill."

"Are you referring to the fact that a snitch has a flesh memory, Minister?" Hermione asked, not looking up from her book. "I'm sure that's what you're insinuating. Harry, you should take hold of it. It won't do anything, of course, but the Minister won't trust you..." She trailed off as she turned a page. "Ah... yeah, the Minister won't trust you until you touch it."

Harry shrugged and took the snitch, tossing it up and down. "Nope, doesn't seem to be anything but a snitch, Minister." Harry put the

snitch into his pocket, feeling it's tired wings fluttering lightly. "You said that Dumbledore left me two things. What was the other?"

Scrimgeour's eyes narrowed. Harry and Hermione could tell he was disappointed by the lack of response from the snitch. "The final item was the sword of Godric Gryffindor. However, we are not allowing that bequest to be honoured."

Hermione looked up, one eyebrow cocked delicately. "Oh, this'll be good."

"The sword is an important historical artefact, and it has never belonged to Dumbledore. The Ministry has confiscated that item." Scrimgeour leaned back in his chair. "I'm curious, though, as to why he left it to you."

"Perhaps Dumbledore felt that I should have another reminder about the rewards of perseverance and skill, sir. I did, after all, kill a basilisk with that blade in my second year." Harry said nonchalantly. Inside, however, he knew the real reason, and he knew that the Ministry confiscating the sword was a blow against their quest.

"I believe there to be another reason, Potter." Scrimgeour said. "I think that Dumbledore believed only the sword of Godric Gryffindor, wielded by the Chosen One, can kill the Heir of Slytherin. Is that true?"

Harry shrugged. "Here's an idea; why don't you send an Auror to poke Voldemort with a sword and see what happens. If he keels over, I'll volunteer to go and poke him with Godric's sword. How's that?"

"You try my patience, Potter!" Scrimgeour snarled.

"You've already exceeded mine!" Harry snarled back. "You're supposed to be the Minister of Magic, for fuck's sake! You're supposed to be leading the country! And what are you doing with your 'valuable' time? You're picking over Dumbledore's bones! Looking for some quick way out!" Harry allowed himself to calm down. "I think we've finished here, Minister. Thank you for delivering our bequests. I'm sure you can see yourself out."

At that moment, Arthur and Molly rushed into the living room...

"Scrimgeour had spent the previous month working on that snitch, the book and the Deluminator. He hadn't planned any new campaigns against Voldemort. He had made a lick of difference in the war. All he'd done was pore over those three items." Harry sighed. "No wonder we were bloody losing. Our leaders had no sense of priority at all."

Hermione let out a soft snort. "Still, we now had these items. Scrimgeour had no choice but to hand them over, since the Decree for Justifiable Confiscation only gave him thirty-one days to check them out. The book was useful, not that Scrimgeour could ever find that out. The Deluminator would give Ron the ability to track us, something neither of us was particularly thrilled about, to be honest. And the snitch? Well, the snitch... I leave that 'til later."

The audience groaned slightly, prompting Harry and Hermione to smile. Harry leaned over his shoulder to look at Dumbledore. "Would you care to tell them, sir?"

Dumbledore's portrait shook his head. "Far be it from me to interrupt such a fascinating tale, Harry, my boy. You're telling this better than I ever could." Dumbledore twinkled at the audience, before looking back at Harry, who was again facing front.

"I'll say one thing about the snitch. There was a short message inscribed on the snitch, telling me when to use it. It stated 'I open at the close'. Moving on, Bill and Fleur's wedding was next. Bill had pretty much healed from the attack by Greyback, although his face was scarred. As Fleur said in the Hospital Wing on that night, she's pretty enough for both of them. They got married without a hitch... well, with a hitch, actually. Ow!" Harry scowled, rubbing his now-bruised arm, Hermione looking innocently at him.

"After the wedding, we saw several people milling about. Xenophilius Lovegood, Luna's father was there, wearing an odd symbol on a chain around his neck. That symbol is important later in the story. Krum attended the wedding after Fleur invited him, and he noticed

the symbol. Said it was Grindelwald's mark. He didn't like Xeno wearing it.

"During the reception, I sat with Elphias Doge, and I congratulated him on his tasteful obituary in the Prophet. Of course, Ron's Great Aunt Muriel turned up, and started on about those bloody articles from Rita Skeeter in the paper. Talking about Kendra Dumbledore."

"Ah, mother." Dumbledore said cheerfully. "A lovely woman. You'd have liked her, Harry. In many ways, Lily, and indeed Hermione, remind me of her. A Muggleborn, bright, beautiful... a true delight to know."

"The subject of Arianna Dumbledore came up. I didn't know who she was. I didn't know that the Dumbledores lived and died in Godric's Hollow. Of course, I knew my parents were there, but I'd never gathered up the courage to go and see them."

Hermione squeezed his hand as he spoke.

"Albus never told people about his sister. He had his reasons for doing that, and we shall cover them in due time. So... where was I? Ah, yes. Muriel badmouthing Dumbledore, Viktor Krum glaring at Xenophilius Lovegood because of the symbol he was wearing, which was Grindelwald's, and people were drinking, dancing and having fun.

"And then Shackbolt ruined it. Or rather, his message ruined it. I still remember it, even now. It was short, it was simple and it was horrifying. Shack, you remember what it was?"

In the crowd, Shackbolt shrugged. "Not really, Harry. It was a difficult time."

"Yes. Yes, it was." Harry said. "It was a mere ten words, but they were scary as hell. The message was: 'The Ministry has fallen. Scrimgeour is dead. They are coming.'" The way Harry said it made several people get goosebumps, cold shivers racing up and down spines. "And they were coming. In fact, by the time we realised what the bloody hell was going on, they'd arrived. Death Eaters crashed the wedding.



"Hermione grabbed Ron, sadly, and disappeared the three of us out of there. We appeared in Muggle London, and headed into a café. While we were there, three Death Eaters attacked us. We disabled them, memory charmed them, and left, heading to our last refuge. Grimmauld Place. The Ancient and Noble Shithouse of Black."

"Fortunately, I'd kept hold of my emergency bag." Hermione smoothly took up the monologue. "And Harry still had that mokeskin pouch round his neck. We still had all our gear. Despite our... abrupt departure, we were able to carry on with our mission."

"I had another vision while we were at Grimmauld Place." Harry said. "Which is to say I had a great splitting migraine with pictures. Voldemort was pissed that we weren't all killed or captured at the wedding. Poor Rowle was being tortured. Of course, since he was a murdering psychopath, neither myself nor Hermione really felt that bad for him."

"Also, that evening, a Patronus arrived from Arthur. He basically told us that the Weasleys had gotten out safely, but they were being watched. We couldn't go back, but at least they were alive and well. That was enough for us at that moment."

"We prowled around Grimmauld Place, seeing if there was anything we could use. I found a stash of letters and stuff in Sirius' room. Letters from my parents, describing Bathilda Bagshot. More and more things were pressing us to go to Godric's Hollow. But why? What was in Godric's Hollow that was so important? And why would all this information about Dumbledore's past be coming up now? How was it relevant, now that the man was dead? So many questions, and nowhere near enough answers."

"When I woke up to find Harry missing, I admit, I panicked." Hermione said softly. "I ran through the house looking for him, just in case he'd passed out or had another vision. I found him in Sirius' room, and he showed me the letter. I, too, was curious. It seemed we were being pushed."

"One other thing while we were wandering through the house. We found the name 'Regulus Arcturus Black'. 'RAB'. The initials on the note inside the fake Horcrux. During the summer after our fourth year, while we were waging war against Grimmauld Place, we'd come across this dirty old locket that none of us could open. When looking at Dumbledore's memories of Tom Riddle's past, both me and Hermione got that little flash, telling us we should recognise it, but we didn't. It never occurred to us that both of us had held one of Tom's bloody Horcruxes in our hands. Personally, I think the Horcrux had some charms on it that made us forget. A bit like a notice-me-not charm."

Hermione nodded. "Yes... both me and Harry have nearly perfect recall. We should have recognised it, but we just blanked. It must have been a spell."

"But now we knew. We knew who'd taken the locket. Regulus Black. A Death Eater who'd turned. And Regulus' most faithful servant was still around. Kreacher!" Harry called out, summoning the ancient elf to him. With a crack, Kreacher appeared on the stage, staring balefully at the audience.

"How're you doing, Kreacher?" Hermione asked softly.

"Mistress asks after Kreacher's health?" The elf asked. "Mistress is too kind. Kreacher is well, thank you, Mistress."

In his portrait, Sirius blinked. "He's... nice?"

"Padfoot." Harry said sternly, before looking at the elf. "Kreacher, we were just discussing what happened when we arrived at Grimmauld Place in August of last year. We'd appreciate any contributions you could make."

"As master requests." Kreacher said, bowing slightly. As he leaned forward, a shiny gold locket could be seen hanging round his neck.

"While we were searching Regulus' rooms, Hermione remembered the locket that we'd seen had been at Grimmauld. I remembered, too."

I'll admit, I felt like a bloody fool for not remembering it sooner. I immediately called Kreacher, who appeared."

Kreacher nodded, his ears flapping slightly. "Master asked Kreacher where Master Regulus' locket had gone. Kreacher told him the dirty shambling man stole it."

Harry chuckled. "He means Mundungus Fletcher. That rotten scoundrel had stolen one of the most important artefacts in the Wizarding world. If Voldemort had gotten wind that he had it, he'd have been dead instantly. Kreacher then explained that Voldemort had requested the service with an elf. Of course, at that time, Regulus was a loyal Death Eater, and immediately volunteered Kreacher for the duty."

Kreacher nodded again. "Kreacher was taken by the Dark Lord to a cave by the sea. Beyond the cave was a cavern and a boat. There... there was a cauldron full of shiny green potion. The Dark Lord made Kreacher drink the potion..."

Dumbledore's portrait gasped. "Kreacher, I'm so sorry."

"Kreacher thanks Master Dumbly-door." Kreacher said solemnly. "Kreacher did not like shiny green potion. After Kreacher finished potion, and burned and writhed while Dark Lord laughed, he dropped a locket into the cauldron, and put more shiny green potion inside. Then the Dark Lord sailed away, leaving Kreacher to die in cave."

Several of the more moderate people in the audience (mainly Muggleborns) gasped at the cruelty, while the bigoted purebloods nodded in satisfaction. It was all the elves were good for, really. Of course, thanks to the new laws, those bigoted purebloods would soon be receiving a swift kick in the proverbial nuts if they tried anything like that.

Harry cleared his throat. "Then, Kreacher told us that he apparated out of the cave. Since Voldemort thought that House Elves were basically vermin, he never considered the need to create anti-apparition wards that would stop an elf. This gave us a possible avenue of attack. We weren't sure what'd be needed, though."

"Master then gave me Master Regulus' locket." Kreacher said, turning and half-bowing to Harry. "Kreacher was honoured at the gift, and left to find dirty shambling man."

"We expected Kreacher would be back within a few hours." Hermione said. "After all, House Elves can go pretty much anywhere, and they're very powerful. But, Kreacher didn't come back for several days. While we were waiting, a pair of Death Eaters took up station in the grassy square outside Grimmauld Place. They didn't try to come into the house, which we found curious. Surely the death of Dumbledore had weakened the secret."

Harry smirked. "Ron believed that Professor Snape would have given the address up to Voldemort. Of course, we knew better than that. The only reason Professor Snape would give up the address is if we told him to."

Snape's portrait nodded slowly.

"We even managed to send him a communiqué, just a short one. He explained that the Death Eaters were moving slowly, gathering in the shadows. Voldemort's paranoia was at full power, so he wasn't sharing his plans with anyone, except those who needed to know."

"Then, we had a visitor..."

Flashback: The Black Family Manor, #12 Grimmauld Place, London  
Friday, 22nd August, 1997

Harry was headed into the kitchen when he heard one of the jinxes that Moody had placed activate. "Severus Snape?"

An oh-so-familiar voice called out gently, "It was not I who killed you, Albus." The dust golem dissolved again.

"Identify yourself!" Harry snapped, his wand in hand.

"I am Remus John Lupin, otherwise known as 'Mr. Moony'. I am the proud husband of Nymphadora 'Don't-Call-Me-Nymphadora!' Tonks. I

was your DADA teacher for your third year, and I and one other introduced you to Mr. Patronus Prongs."

Harry lowered his wand, not seeing Ron and Hermione stood behind him as he threw himself forward, wrapping his unofficial godfather in a hug. "Hey, Moony." Harry felt a pair of impossibly strong arms wrap round him ribs, but he wasn't worried.

"Hey, cub." Remus said thickly. "Been a while. You okay?"

Harry could tell what Remus was asking. "Yeah... there hasn't been any more attempts. We're all okay, Moony."

Remus pulled off his cloak, revealing his shabby robes. "Still no sign of Severus, then?" He managed to produce a suitably nasty snarl and sneer. "Shame..."

"No. I don't think we'll have one, to be honest." Harry said, reaching up to brush his hair back, and flashing his watch, a single finger extended. "I wouldn't mind a word with him."

Remus reached up to scratch his nose, using two fingers. Harry nodded imperceptibly. "I don't think you're the only one who wants a word, Harry." With a sigh, Remus led the trio into the kitchen, sitting in front of the fire. "There's a lot to tell you."

After garnering suitable refreshments, the foursome sat to speak. "First of all, everyone is being watched by Death Eaters. These Death Eaters now include a number of Ministry Aurors, who now had funky new tattoos to go with their Auror robes."

Harry nodded, sighing angrily. "How much of the Ministry does Voldemort control?"

"The whole shebang, Harry." Remus said. "Did you three come here straight after the wedding?"

Hermione shook her head. "Nah. Had to lose of couple of Death Eaters on Tottenham Court Road. Ron thinks that Harry may still have the trace on him."

Remus scoffed. He knew the trace was bollocks, but he realised that they needed to keep up the act around the youngest male Weasley. "That's impossible. The 'trace' disappears on your seventeenth birthday. And even if it hadn't, the pair of Death Eaters outside would undoubtedly be using it to come in here and capture you. No, there must be another reason."

"Yeah, we spotted them." Harry said, making Remus nod his head, awarding him a point. He knew from experience that Harry and Hermione's magical detection was at least on a par with Dumbledore's. For them to miss a pair of Death Eaters... nah, it was too ludicrous to even mention.

"After the wedding..." Remus began slowly, "most of the people had disappeared. A group of 'Ministry personnel', which were a combination of Aurors and 'Specialists', read: Death Eaters, arrived, and searched the Burrow, looking for the three of you. Of course, since you weren't there, and they were still acting as though they're Ministry, they couldn't do anything. According to the scuttlebutt, the Death Eaters tortured Scrimgeour to find your location. He didn't give you up."

Harry's eyebrow shot in genuine shock. He honestly thought Scrimgeour was more self-serving than that. For him to protect Harry... He shook his head, bringing himself back on topic. "So, they searched the Burrow, and they probably questioned everyone there. It's fortunate I was in disguise."

"True." Remus nodded. "At the same time as they crashed the wedding, other groups hit the home of every known Order member. No fatalities, but there was some... unpleasantness. Nym's parents were tortured by the Cruciatus, but they're okay."

Ron blinked, before he began growling. "What about all the protection charms?"

"With the full support of the Ministry?" Hermione asked bitterly. "With Aurors working alongside the Death Eaters? They could bulldoze their way in. Why would the Aurors go along with this, though. Even

the ones that haven't gone over have to know that this is pushing the line."

Remus nodded, reaching into his pocket. "Yeah... there's something else." With a quick flash, Remus had cast a sleeping spell on Ron, guaranteeing the some privacy and intelligent conversation.

"So, what's happening, Moony." Harry said, sitting up and getting down to business.

"I've spoken to Severus twice. Unfortunately, even though he's pretty much Voldemort's number one at the moment, he's being kept outside the loop. All the Death Eaters are, so there's not a lot of news from that angle.

"The Prophet has launched a series of articles, insinuating you're responsible for Dumbledore's death. Oh, they're not coming out and saying that directly. You're merely wanted for questioning about it. But, they will stop at nothing to get you. Ron and Hermione are both fair game, and they'll be used as bait to get you."

Harry resisted the urge to say 'they can have Ron'. "Prophet acting on their own, or are they back under the tender mercies of the Ministry?"

"Ministry, far as we can tell." Remus said. "Doesn't matter, though. They're stirring up the country against you. It seems the plan is for anyone to see you to subdue you and call the Death Aurors. Scrimgeour hasn't been assassinated. He's 'retired'."

"That's one way to describe it." Harry muttered.

"The guy who's replaced him is Pius Thicknesse." Remus advised gently.

"Ah, the man who decided to keep me locked in Privet Drive." Harry noted. "Bloody marvellous? Is he an Eater, or under Imperius?"

"Imperius." Remus replied. "But it doesn't matter. There's far more happening. Voldemort is effectively ruling the country. There's a new

Muggleborn register being implemented. Any and all Muggleborns are being rounded up for 'stealing magic'."

Hermione gasped, before her face settled back into impassiveness. "An impressive stroke. Eliminate everyone but the purebloods. Camps or exterminations?"

"We don't know yet." Remus replied, running his hands through his hair. "What we do know is that all Muggleborns are 'invited' to register. Anyone who doesn't will no doubt be facing a visit from the Death Aurors."

Hermione nodded slowly. "I think we need to get in contact with Umbridge."

"Received a letter from her two days ago." Remus replied. "Her words; 'she's taking care of it'. I trust her, Harry."

"As do I." Harry said.

"Me, too." Hermione added. "She'll keep the Muggleborns safe. So, that's one thing we don't need to worry about, anyway."

Remus nodded, before he sighed. "Hogwarts has now become mandatory for all witches and wizards. Obviously not the Muggleborns, but everyone else has to attend. The tuition has been removed, and funding is being drawn directly from the Ministry."

"So, Voldemort's keeping a firm hand over the kids and making sure he can begin training an army. I bet the Slytherins are coming in their pants from this one."

"Probably." Remus said. "Even though I hate it, it's a smart plan. By keeping all children in Hogwarts, the parents can't really make a move against Voldemort without the risk being passed onto their children. By doing this, he's effectively neutralised a good seventy percent of the adult Wizarding population."

Harry had to have a grudging respect for Voldemort. He certainly wasn't a fool. "Agreed. The bigots won't give a shit, but the



moderates and half-bloods have been taken off the game table." He sighed. "Anything else? Any more bombshells?"

"Tonks is pregnant." Remus said after a moment. "I will admit, I'm... concerned about it."

"Remus, stop it." Harry said tiredly. "You know you love her, you know she loves you. And you know that any kid will be lucky to have two brilliant people like you as parents."

"She's with her parents at the moment." Remus said slowly. "As you can probably understand, they're not happy about their only daughter marrying a werewolf."

"Oh, they can blow it out their arse!" Hermione snapped. "You're a ravening bloodthirsty beast for less than twelve hours a month, Moony. Tonks is worse, and we all know that. You're a good man."

Remus squeaked when Harry and Hermione launched themselves from their chairs, wrapping him up in a tight hug. "Besides," Harry said, "he'll have big brother Harry and big sister Hermione teaching him to play pranks. What more could he ask for?"

With a sigh, Remus hugged the two back. "Actually, that was something Tonks and I wanted to speak to you two about. We don't want you to be big brother and sister to him."

"O-Oh..." Hermione said quietly.

"No, we'd like you to be godmother and godfather to him." Remus said, pulling them closer. He groaned as he received the full force of Hermione Potter's hug, with Harry matching her.

"Of course." They said together. "But, it won't come to that, Moony." Harry said. "I won't let you die. If you do, I'll hunt you down and kill you myself. Your kid's gonna have a great daddy."

"Thanks, Harry." Remus said tearfully, before he released them, scrubbing his eyes free of tears. "I-If it does happen... you'll take care of him?"

"Him'? It's a boy?" Harry asked.

"Yeah. He's only a few months along, but we know."

"Of course we will, Moony. But it won't come to that." Harry repeated. "You'll see. One day, we'll look back at this solemn conversation and laugh like hyenas."

Remus sighed. "I hope so, Harry... I hope so."

Harry looked over his shoulder at the communication mirror, where Remus and Tonks sat watching the show. "I told you that it was a silly conversation, Moony."

"Yes, cub, you did." Remus sighed. "You were right. I was wrong. You rule all."

"Excellent." Harry turned back to the audience. "Moony modified Ron's memory so that he'd think we'd argued and Moony had stomped out in anger. Ron kept trying to comfort Hermione about the argument, which both of us found pretty funny." Harry sniggered, Hermione joining him after glaring at the irate redhead.

"We were still waiting for Kreacher to come back with Mundungus Fletcher." Harry continued, then gestured at the little elf who'd been stood silent.

"Kreacher managed to find dirty shambling man," He said proudly, "and he brought him back to Master. Master was generous in allowing Kreacher to persuade dirty thief to talk."

Hermione smirked. "What Kreacher means is that he was able to whack Mundungus on the head with a saucepan. Which, I admit, is far less than I would have done."

"Same here." Harry said. "Fletcher admitted that he didn't have the locket anymore. He'd been hocking his stolen goods in Diagon Alley, and a member of the Ministry came up to him. And that member was

correct; you need a licence to trade in magical artefacts. That Ministry official took the locket from him. And then Mundungus described her.

"Kreacher, what did he say?"

Kreacher frowned in concentration as he tried to remember. "Dirty thief said 'Little woman. Bow on top of 'er head. Looked like a toad.'" Kreacher quoted.

"Indeed." Hermione said, nodding appreciatively at Kreacher, who blushed green under the praise. "So, we knew that Dee was still alive and active. And even more importantly, she'd managed to gain possession of one of the Horcruxes we needed." With a nod, Kreacher apparated out, going back to... whatever he was doing.

Flashback: The Black Family Manor, #12 Grimmauld Place, London  
Monday, 1st September, 1997

Harry materialised on the top step, barely managing to keep the happy whistle out of his mouth. The Death Eaters had been gathering to watch Grimmauld Place more and more, but none had tried to breach the house. He let himself in, being chastised mildly by Kreacher for walking through the house in his shoes, before meeting Hermione and Ron in the kitchen.

"So, what's the news?" Ron asked, taking a huge slurp of his soup, spilling half of it down his robes, making Hermione wrinkle her nose.

Harry sat down, thanking Kreacher for his bowl, before eating with a touch more grace. "I got a copy of the Prophet." He said slowly. "And there's news." He pulled it out of his pocket, flattening it slightly before passing it across the table to Hermione.

There, in large bold print across the top was the Headline, 'Severus Snape confirmed as Hogwarts Headmaster!'. For a fraction of a second, Hermione had a grin on her face, but it was quickly banished. This was indeed good news for their side.

Ron spat out a mouthful of soup as he read the article. "This... this... this is an outrage!" He roared. He slumped forward as Kreacher clicked his fingers behind him, neatly knocking the redhead out.

"Thanks, Kreacher." Hermione said tenderly.

"You're welcome, Mistress." Kreacher said, before popping out.

"This is brilliant!" Hermione said brightly. "Severus will be able to do a lot of good there."

As if on cue, Harry's watch vibrated. "Huh..."

"Snape to Potter."

Harry grinned. "Sevvie!"

"Don't call me that." Came Snape's tired voice. "Every bloody time, Harry."

"I know... Headmaster."

"Ah. You've heard then."

"Kinda hard not to." Hermione said. "It's plastered all over the front page of the Daily Prophet. Congratulations, sir."

"I thank you, but I have to say I don't want to be Headmaster. I want Dumbledore back and Voldemort gone. Bastard..."

"I think we all do, sir." Harry said supportively. "But, under the circumstances, I think this is probably for the best."

"I hate paperwork." Snape grumbled. "And I hate the Carrows. Have you seen the other staff appointments? Alecto Carrow, who was that little bitch who was supporting Draco on the Astronomy Tower, teaching Muggle Studies? The only thing she could teach about Muggles is how to kill, rape, maim and torture. She couldn't tell you how to e-mail someone, or how to get fish and chips. And Amycus

teaching DADA? That one pissed me off. Dark Arts, maybe. Defence... no. Useless. Utterly useless."

Harry just let Snape get it off his chest.

"That reminds me, where's Weasley?"

"Unconscious." Hermione said smugly.

"Ah. Well, whoever did that has my congratulations and my thanks."

"We'll pass that along to Kreacher, sir." Harry said. "I know McGonagall's in the know about you, sir, but what about the other teachers?"

McGonagall's voice came over the communicator. "They're aware that things have changed, Harry. Unfortunately, none of them have any Occlumency skills, with the possible exception of Horace Slughorn, and there's little we can do to prepare them. As such, they're still out of the loop. However, we know that our first duty and responsibility is to the children. Not a single staff member will leave."

"That's good." Hermione said. "The Express should be arriving soon, shouldn't it?"

There was a pause. "About another hour, hour and a half." Snape said after a moment. "We were hoping for an update on your hunt, Harry. Things here are getting worse. There's little we can do openly."

Harry nodded, even though they couldn't really see him. "We've got a lead on one already, sir. The locket. According to Mundungus Fletcher, who stole it, it's been confiscated by a Ministry official."

"Shit." McGonagall said bluntly. "That's a problem."

"Delores Umbridge."

"That's less of a problem." McGonagall said after a moment. "Will she relinquish it?"

"We believe that she will." Hermione said. "She's like you and Severus; working within the system to bring Voldemort down."

"Good. What about other leads?" Snape asked.

"Nothing yet. We've been focussing on this one, and gathering up some supplies." Harry said. "We should be ready to go soon. Unfortunately, we've managed to pick up some surveillance."

"Ah, yes." Snape said silkily. "It's because of Sirius' will. It became public record in the Ministry archives, and since Voldemort controls the Ministry..."

"We know." Harry said. "Remus stopped by a few days ago. Tonks is pregnant, you know."

"Is she?" McGonagall asked, and Harry and Hermione could almost hear her becoming broody. "I'll have to have a chat with her later."

"Actually, Severus, I was wondering something." Hermione said. "Can Lycanthropy be passed on through reproduction?"

"I don't know." Snape said after a few moments. "It's not something that's routinely checked. To my knowledge, there are no born werewolves, just turned. The Ministry has strict laws regarding werewolves having children. If both parents are Lycanthropes, I would imagine that the illness would be passed on. With only one... we have to remember that Tonks is a Metamorphagus, and that magic might win out. Until the child is born and a few tests are carried out, we simply won't know."

"And when you say 'tests', you mean..." Hermione trailed off, hoping that the next words out of Snape's mouth weren't 'dissection'.

"A routine blood screening, primarily." Snape said casually. "Perhaps a small skin sample could be subjected to silver. If the skin burns, then it's certainly possible that the babe will be at least partially afflicted by Lycanthropy."

Harry looked at Hermione who shrugged. "Seems simple enough." She sighed. "Anything else we need to know?"

"At the moment, do not attempt to contact us." Snape said. "We simply don't know when we'll be secure. It would be better for us if we were to contact you."

"Understood and acknowledged." Harry said. "Take care of yourselves, you hear me?"

"Yes, sir!" Snape and McGonagall said in crisp military fashion.

"Pair of funny buggers, aren't you?" Harry moaned softly. "I'm serious."

"We know." They said, again in unison. "You make sure you and Hermione take care of yourselves." Snape said passionately. "The last thing I want to see is my niece and nephew getting hurt."

"We'll be careful." Hermione said. "After all, we've got Ron with us... what could possibly go wrong?"

"I won't dignify that with an answer." Snape sniffed disdainfully.

After the call ended, Hermione refilled both of their soup bowls, and with a sigh, woke Ron up. He blinked for a moment, before grabbing his spoon and continuing to shovel soup into his mouth.

Hermione was pretending to reread the article, quoting bits and pieces. Ron was nodding along absently as he continued to eat.

"Later that evening, I had another vision." Harry said. "I saw Voldemort torturing a family, looking for information about Gregorovitch. Ron was stood right there, so Hermione had to bollock me for not practicing Occlumency."

"I hated that bloody connection." Hermione said bitterly. "Even Occlumency couldn't block it, since it was, in effect, a hole in Harry's mind. He couldn't block it, no matter what. It simply wasn't possible."

"So, we knew that the locket was in the Ministry," Harry continued, "and we believed that the Sword of Gryffindor was, as well. After all, Scrimgeour had confiscated it, and we never thought to ask Severus or Minerva." He chuckled self-depreciatively. "I wish we had."

"Outside the Ministry, we stunned a couple of people and nicked some hair for Polyjuice potion. We snuck inside, splitting up to find our targets..."

Flashback: Ministry of Magic, London  
Tuesday, 2nd September, 1997

Ron had gone off, Polyjuiced as the repairman, to fix someone's office, leaving Hermione, Polyjuiced as Mafalda Hopkirk, and Harry stood together in the atrium, staring at the god-awful statue that had replaced the Fountain of Magical Brethren. It was, frankly, an abomination, enough to make Harry want to blast the obscenity into smithereens. Soon... He told himself.

They headed to the lift, heading up to the first level. Neither he nor Hermione really knew where they were supposed to go, but they'd wing it until the situation changed.

As the lift door opened, Harry's heart leapt into his chest. Stood before him was the very woman he wanted to see, talking with a long-haired wizard, clad in black and gold. Harry remembered, from his 'detentions' in fifth year, that this was Pius Thicknesse, the man who had replaced Scrimgeour as the Minister.

He glanced over at Hermione, sending a silent message. She nodded slightly, before straightening up. Umbridge and the Minister came into the lift, leaving the two people who were talking with them behind.

The instant the door shut, Harry's wand flicked, stopping the lift, while Hermione's wand rendered the Minister unconscious. Umbridge span round, her wand appearing in hand far faster than her portly frame would allow.

"I solemnly swear I'm up to no good." Harry said, smiling at Umbridge. "And I solemnly swear you are not ugly."



Umbridge's face split into a wide grin. "Harry Potter, as I live and breathe!" She tucked her wand into her pocket, wrapping him into a tight hug. "Damn, Harry, it's good to see you!" She looked over at Hopkirk!Hermione. "Miss Granger, I presume?"

Hermione nodded. "It's actually Mrs. Potter, now, Dee." She accepted the hug. "And I agree with Harry; it's bloody good to see you."

Dee looked at her clipboard. "I assume that you're under Polyjuice? Glamours don't work too well in here." She pulled back her sleeve, revealing the glamour gauntlet she wore. Hermione's practiced eyes could see the upgrades since fifth year, providing more power. "Had to boost this twice..."

"Yeah. We've got about another fifty minutes." Harry said, deciding to get down to business. "We're actually here to see you. You confiscated a locket from Mundungus Fletcher..."

Dee was already pulling the locket from around her neck. "Yes... it's not... it's not exactly normal, Harry. I put a stasis charm round it. I started feeling really weird when I wore it. I just... I knew you'd want it." She handed it over. "I didn't think you'd be around so soon. There's a price on your head, you know?"

Harry nodded, putting the locket round his own neck, tucking it under his robes. "Yeah. A mere ten thousand galleons. I'm upset about that. I thought I'd be worth more."

"You are to me." Hermione said softly.

Dee grinned at the utter 'in-love' feeling she got from the couple in front of her, even under Polyjuice. "Since time is limited, we'll get to it. What do you know about what's happening in the Ministry?"

"Voldemort's taken over. Your cover as a blood-head allowed you to keep your position." Hermione recited instantly.

"Indeed." Dee nodded. She knew they'd be on the ball. "Now, the Ministry has been rounding up the Muggleborns, stating that they

must have 'stolen' their magic. Imbeciles... I'm the one who is responsible for dealing with them."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I've been sending them to camps, where they'll be out of the way."

"And the truth?" Harry asked.

Dee sighed. "I've been sending them to Butlins in Minehead, Somerset, where the last group of real Aurors are working for their protection. Their wands are confiscated before they're sent away, and the Aurors deliver them back when they get to the camp."

Hermione laughed. "Oh, the irony."

Dee shrugged, looking a little embarrassed. "It was about the only thing I could think of. No-one, not even the Muggle government, would notice a lot of people arriving at a holiday camp."

"No, it's brilliant!" Harry said, sniggering. "Only you, Dee."

Dee glanced at her watch. "I'm actually off to one of the 'hearings' now. Harry, I suggest you make a quick circuit of the Ministry. Find anyone you need to speak to quickly. You're currently undesirable number one, and they will want to catch you."

Harry nodded. "Is Arthur Weasley still here?"

"He is." Dee confirmed. "But he's being tracked. All the Weasleys are. Be very careful in here, Harry. The walls have eyes and ears. In some cases, that's literal." She turned to Hermione. "I'll need you to come with me. A group of Muggleborns are having their hearing this morning." She sighed. "Unfortunately, I have to be a bitch to them. Can you help me get them out?"

Hermione nodded.

"Now, we don't have much time. We'll need to wake the Minister up, and get back. Time is not on our side."

Harry levitated the Minister back to his feet, propping him up before Hermione woke him. The instant that he blinked, Harry released the levitation, flicking his wand to set the lift in motion...

Harry grinned at the audience, who were looking at him in utter shock. "So, Umbridge didn't lie. She did send the Muggleborns to camps, to get them out of the way of the purebloods. Of course, what she failed to mention was that they were Muggle holiday camps, under the protection of the Aurors. Still, the Death Eaters didn't need that little piece of information."

Hermione sniggered as she saw Arthur's face drop in shock. "Did you really think that we'd allow them to do that sort of thing? Yeah, we were keeping a low profile, but we wouldn't let the Ministry, even one that was being run by Voldemort, do that sort of thing. No chance in hell."

"Dee was working on the inside." Harry said. "And she'd given us the Horcrux we desperately wanted. It was so easy, it was a bit troubling." He shrugged. "Still, we weren't complaining too much. We were a step closer to our goals."

"During our escape from the Ministry, after Death Eater Yaxley had figured out that we were impostors, we disappeared. Unfortunately, Yaxley grabbed my arm when we apparated to Grimmauld Place. I managed to knock him back, but I'd already taken him inside the boundaries. He'd be able to go back, and possibly take some friends with him. For the foreseeable future, Grimmauld Place was no longer an option."

"Fortunately, we'd planned for this eventuality. Inside Hermione's bottomless handbag was the tent that we'd used during the Quidditch world cup. We managed to apparate there, but Ron was splinched during the escape, and bleeding out.

"She managed to heal his injury, but he'd need time to rest and recover. So, we set the tent up in the woods, putting up a few enchantments and protections."

Hermione snorted. "'A few'? Gringotts would have been jealous of our protections. While we were inside the boundaries, we simply didn't exist. I didn't just protect the site; I removed us from reality. Or near enough, anyway."

"After the tent was put up, we began talking about Voldemort. Ron was coming round, and snapped at us to not say the name. That we had to respect him." Harry snorted. "The day I respected Voldemort is the day that Satan will be going to work in a snow plough." He sighed when he saw the lost looks on the audiences' faces. "The day that Hell freezes over." As the crowd nodded in understanding, he carried on.

"We carried Ron into the tent, dumped him on a bunk, then took a look at the Horcrux. I could tell, just by being near it, that it was still active, and it hadn't been destroyed. We knew that destroying the vile thing would have to become a priority. Ginny Weasley couldn't control herself when she had Voldemort's diary, the compulsion was that high on it. We knew the locket would be the same. Luckily, me and Hermione were both perfect Occlumens, so we knew we'd be able to control ourselves."

Ron was flushing beet-red in the audience. He knew that he'd never mastered Occlumency, and that the Horcrux had affected him badly while wearing it. He knew the final reckoning between Potter and his bitch would be coming, and decided to brace himself for that.

"While I was on guard duty that evening, I had another Voldemort vision. He was torturing Gregorovitch, the wand-maker, to find out about another wand. Gregorovitch told Voldemort that the wand had been stolen years ago, and Voldemort killed him over that little nugget of information."

He sighed, then looked at his wife, asking if they should reveal what wand. She shook her head slightly, telling him to wait a little longer. He nodded slightly, before turning back.

"We left the woods, not wanting to stay in one place for too long. We knew that the Ministry would be bringing the magical tag net to bear on us, and staying for any length of time would be inviting them to come and capture us. We moved around, filching fresh food from farms and leaving them money for it. We still had a reasonable supply of gold that I'd got from my vault. We agreed to each wear the Horcrux, since it was seeping out negative feelings. I was having problems casting my Patronus while wearing it. Even though I'm a fairly proficient Occlumens, the Horcrux was a leech. Every time I cast magic while wearing it, it would steal a portion of that energy, trying to power itself back up."

Hermione cleared her throat. "I took the next shift wearing it, and I knew instantly what Harry meant about it being a leech. It was... horrible. Truly horrible. It was battering on my mental shields each time I raised my wand. Powerful, but unfocussed."

"We went to the Orphanage that Voldemort was raised in, performing a brief search. We didn't go too in-depth, because we knew that Professor Dumbledore had already searched it. However, by carrying a Horcrux with us, we'd have a better chance to locate on. There was nothing there."

Hermione grinned. "Now, this is where it gets a little more interesting. Mr. Weasley, would you release the silencing charm on Ron for a moment, please?" After Arthur flicked his wand at his son, Hermione asked a question. "Ron, for those weeks while we were trailing all over the country, what were we doing?"

"Looking for another Horcrux." Ron said sulkily.

"And did we find any?"

"No."

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley." Hermione said, nodding to Arthur. After Ron was once again silenced, going even more red in the face, Hermione looked at the audience. "I'm afraid that Ron is mistaken. We were having success in our mission. At each of the locations we

went to, we found a Horcrux. Old Horcruxes, from figures all throughout history. Some of them thousands of years old."

Dumbledore blinked in his portrait. "You mean..."

Harry nodded. "We found every Horcrux in the British Isles. There were quite a few. Based on that, we can see how Tom Riddle found out about them. In the end, I think the number we collected was... Hermione?"

"Forty-seven." She said, matter-of-factly. "Forty-seven different witches and wizards had made Horcruxes. Forty-seven immortal witches and wizards. With the right spells and components, that would be forty-seven other Dark Lords and Ladies. Naturally, we didn't want to allow this to happen."

"We collected all of them, putting them in the little moleskin bag Hagrid had given me. Each time we found one, we Obliviated Ron."

Percy Weasley was again scribbling down notes, a small smile on his face. Hermione stared at him for a moment, before stifling a grin. She leaned closer to Harry. "His thoughts are; 'I've got them now!'."

"He's in for a rude awakening." Harry whispered back. "So, we were hoovering up various people's immortality. We were still looking for Voldemort's Horcruxes, but also performing a public service, as well. However, we could tell that Ron was getting both bored and annoyed with the mission. He probably thought it was going to be like our previous adventures at Hogwarts, where we had warm beds and three big meals a day. Sitting in a cold tent while roaming around the country was certainly not to his liking."

Remus spoke up from the communications mirror. "I'd like to add that while they were roaming the country, the Order of the Phoenix had effectively been hobbled. Each and every one of us was being watched continuously by the Death Aurors. If we even attempted to act, as Mad-Eye Moody had done, we would be executed. So, we weren't able to do anything but research."

"Remus and Tonks were a big help." Hermione said, looking over her shoulder and winking at them. "Each time we found a Horcrux, we'd test it, finding out who it belonged to." She shuddered slightly as she turned back to the audience. "We learned more about Dark witches and wizards during those months than we ever did during History class."

"With the exception of Tom Riddle, no-one in history had ever made more than one Horcrux." Harry said. "They knew that splitting the soul more than once was far too dangerous. It caused... complications."

"Such as madness, paranoia, massively repressed emotions." Hermione lectured gently. "They knew that immortality was a curse, not a blessing. They wanted to live, true, but they wanted to keep a fraction of their selves. Riddle lost that. He became nothing more than a madman."

"One evening, about a month, six weeks after our Ministry mission, we were having dinner." Hermione continued the tale. "Ron was complaining about my cooking. I wasn't bothered. I know I can't be brilliant at everything. Harry's the cook, not me."

"During the argument, I told them both to shut up. I could hear someone outside the tent. More than one someone, too." Harry smoothly took over the monologue. "We listened into the conversation, listening it. It was several Goblins and several Muggleborns, who'd run from the Muggleborn Registration Act."

Hermione nodded. "Dean Thomas, Ted Tonks, Dirk Cresswell, Griphook and Gornuk. The goblins were telling the wizards that there refused to get involved in what was, essentially, a Wizards' war. Dean didn't know if he was a Muggleborn or a half-blood, since his father had left when he was a baby. He didn't want to take a chance, since the Prophet had told people that Muggleborns were being removed. I don't blame him, really."

"We overheard a conversation about the Sword of Gryffindor, something that we knew we needed. Professor Snape had caught several people trying to steal the sword from his office at Hogwarts."

One of the attempted thieves was Ginny Weasley. So, Professor Snape tried to take the sword to Gringotts, where it would be safe."

"However, Griphook revealed that the Sword of Gryffindor that Professor Snape tried to deposit was a Wizarding-made fake, and that the original was crafted by the Goblins."

Snape's portrait cleared his throat. "I, of course, knew it was a fake... since I was the one who made it. Thanks to Albus, I knew that the Sword of Gryffindor would be needed by the 'Chosen One', and I had no intention of letting Voldemort have it."

Harry grinned at the dumbfounded looks on several faces. "Please!" He scoffed. "We told you that Professor Snape was a good man, on our side. He wasn't working for Voldemort. We've explained why he joined the Death Eaters, and we've explained why he left. We've told you all the help he gave us in preparing for the war... why do you look surprised?"

He sighed, shook his head, and carried on. "Griphook thought he was being clever by not telling Severus that it was a forgery. We also overheard that the attempted thieves were punished cruelly by Snape for having the audacity to try and steal from him." Harry looked at Ginny, who didn't look like she'd been punished cruelly. "Then we learned that Xeno Lovegood had been using the Quibbler to print the truth about the situation. The Ministry's descent into tyranny, the disappearances... all of it.

"Hermione had a flash of inspiration; while we were at Grimmauld Place, we nicked a painting from the wall. It was off Phineas Nigellus Black, one of the former Headmasters. Since he was a Black, there was a second portrait of himself, and he could travel between them. It was an exceptional way of communication between Grimmauld Place and Hogwarts, in case the mirrors weren't available.

"She drew it out of that bottomless handbag, and cast a spell to seal him inside his frame and blindfold him. We didn't want anyone to know where we were or to see who was with us. The portraits at Hogwarts are all bound to assist the Headmaster, but they were also well known to be bloody loudmouths and would blurt out information."



Dumbledore's portrait cleared his throat. "Not all of us, Harry. And Phineas was a Black, first and foremost."

"So was Bella." Harry reminded him, not looking back. "And she had no loyalty."

Hermione continued the tale. "We found out that Ginny, Neville and Luna were the thieves who'd tried to steal the Sword of Gryffindor. So, Snape assigned them detention with Hagrid in the Forbidden Forest. Now, remember the deal that Dee made with the Centaurs back in fifth year? Four squads of Aurors were living in the forest, and they would protect them. Also, Hagrid was forever loyal to Dumbledore. What better way to 'punish' students than to send them into the Forest, where the Aurors, Centaurs and Hagrid would keep them safe?" She sniggered. "They probably all got drunk on Centaurian Ale and had a sleep out."

Ginny blushed. That was what had happened, although the three of them had agreed to never tell anyone.

"Professor Black told us that Professor Dumbledore had wanted to keep the sword available in the event that something happened. We knew the sword would have the power of basilisk venom thanks to the 'adventure' in the Chamber of Secrets. Dumbledore would never have let the Ministry have it. That was when we realised that Scrimgeour not releasing the sword after the will reading wasn't a major problem. However, that did raise another? Where the hell was the Sword of Gryffindor?"

"And then..." Hermione said, with a grin on her face, "something truly amazing happened..."

Flashback: The Forest, Somewhere in Britain  
Sunday, 30th November, 1997

Ron was pacing up and down the tent, ranting about Harry having no idea about the mission. Harry had been calmly countering the accusations with fact, something which was completely lost on the redhead.

(2a)"So why are you still here?" Harry asked Ron.

"Search me," said Ron.

"Go home then." said Harry.

"Yeah, maybe I will!" shouted Ron, and he took several steps toward Harry, who did not back away. "Didn't you hear what they said about my sister? But you don't give a rat's fart, do you, it's only the Forbidden Forest, Harry I've-Faced-Worse Potter doesn't care what happened to her in there! Well, I do, all right? Giant spiders and mental stuff-

"I was only saying... she was with the others, they were with Hagrid-

"Yeah, I get it, you don't care! And what about the rest of my family, 'the Weasleys don't need another kid injured,' did you hear that?"

"Yeah, I-

"Not bothered what it meant, though?"

"Ron!" said Hermione, forcing her way between them. "I don't think it means anything new has happened, anything we don't know about; think, Ron, Bill's already scared, plenty of people must have seen that George has lost an ear by now, and you're supposed to be on your deathbed with spattergroit, I'm sure that's all he meant-

"Oh, you're sure, are you? Right then, well, I won't bother myself about them. It's all right for you, isn't it, with your parents safely out of the way-

"My parents are dead!" Harry bellowed.

"And mine could be going the same way!" yelled Ron.

"Then go!" roared Harry. "Go back to them, pretend you've got over your spattergroit and Mummy'll be able to feed you up and-

Ron made a sudden movement: Harry reacted, but before either wand was clear of its owner's pocket, Hermione had raised her own.

"Protego!" she cried, and an invisible shield expanded between her and Harry on the one side and Ron on the other; all of them were forced backward a few steps by the strength of the spell, and Harry and Ron glared from either side of the transparent barrier as though they were seeing each other clearly for the first time. Harry felt a corrosive hatred toward Ron: Something had broken between them.

"Leave the Horcrux." Harry said.

Ron wrenched the chain from over his head and cast the locket into a nearby chair. He turned to Hermione.

"What are you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you staying, or what?"

"I..." She looked anguished. "Yes... yes, I'm staying. Ron, we said we'd go with Harry, we said we'd help-"

"I get it. You choose him."

"Ron, no... please... come back, come back!"

She was impeded by her own Shield Charm; by the time she had removed it he had already stormed into the night. Harry stood quite still and silent, listening to her sobbing and calling Ron's name amongst the trees.

After a few minutes she returned, her sopping hair plastered to her face.

"He's g-g-gone! Disapparated!"

She threw herself into a chair, curled up, and started to cry.(2b) After thirty seconds, she looked up, her eyes dry, as no tears had actually

passed through. "He's gone..." She leapt up, her hands pumped into fists. "Yes!"

Harry stared at her, bemused. "What?"

"Don't you get it, Harry? The fucking waste of blood and organs has gone!" Hermione was gleeful, then started tugging at her shirt. "For months we've had to tone down the affection. Now, get your kit off, Potter. I want the mother of all shags tonight."

Chuckling, Harry started to unbutton his shirt. "Don't I get to play with you first?"

Hermione was down to knickers, which quickly flew into the kitchen. "Not a chance. I want to ride my basilisk. Foreplay can wait." She pounced, pushing Harry onto the bed, kissing him harshly. She pulled back slightly. "Why aren't you naked yet?"

Harry suddenly pushed her, rolling so she was underneath. "Probably because you're such a naughty witch, you didn't give me a chance." He leaned down and kissed her again.

Hermione reached down, unbuttoning his jeans and pushing them down. "Come on... Harry..." She said between kisses. "I need you..."

"Hang on..." Harry bent his arms and pushed back, clambering off the bed, kicking off his shoes, and pulling his jeans off. Hermione quickly grabbed hold of Harry's Hampton, sucking harshly to make sure he was up enough.

"Okay, Potter. Get over here and fuck me." She commanded. She squeaked when Harry pushed her back onto the bed, knelt between her legs and sheathed himself in one smooth stroke.

"That's what I want..." She gasped, sighing happily as Harry began jack-hammering into her...

After their immediate needs had been sated (which took nearly three hours), Harry and Hermione snuggled in bed together. For the

moment, everything was all right with the world. "He won't be able to come back." Hermione said as she cuddled closer.

"'Tis a dreadful shame." Harry agreed. "I don't know what we'll do without Ron hear belly-aching every two minutes, eating all the food... It's just... tragic."

Hermione sighed in satisfaction. "You know, we should really contact Professor Snape. We have questions for him."

"Yeah." Harry glanced about for his watch, which had gone flying as they began to make love. "Oh, bollocks to it." He clicked his fingers, summoning the watch wandlessly. As it landed nearly in his hand, he pressed his finger against it. "Potter to Snape."

It took a few moments for a response. "I'm here, Harry." He whispered. "Give me a minute." They heard a door shut before the click of a lock. A brief Muffliato later, Snape spoke up. "Okay, I'm here. This is dangerous, my friend, so please, be quick."

"Sword of Gryffindor, Professor. Students in the Forbidden Forest." Harry said quickly.

"Sword's a fake. Real one's hidden. I'll get it to you... somehow. The students were with Hagrid and perfectly safe." Snape replied, equally quickly. "Things here are okay. Several of the students, mainly Longbottom and Lovegood, are trying to reinstate Dumbledore's Army. They keep getting bloody caught, too. I've had to invoke Umbridge's decree about groups of students. None of them are subtle enough to protect themselves against Death Eaters."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, Neville's got a heart of gold, but he's all Gryffindor. Any other problems?"

"Nothing we can't handle, Harry. Minerva's been coming closer and closer to transfiguring the Death Eaters into something useful. I suggested toilets. I think crapping on them would be very therapeutic."

Hermione burst out giggling. "I think we'll need to remember that one." She said through her giggles.

"Other than that, I'm doing my best to protect the students." Snape said, sighing. "Most of them don't realise that playing along with the Death Eaters would be best for the moment. I daren't tell them, since none of them are Occlumens, and both Carrows are reasonable at Legilimency. If some students suddenly couldn't be scanned, they'd be hell to pay."

Harry nodded absently. "Okay, we understand that. Are you okay, Severus? No punishments from Voldemort?"

Snape scoffed. "Are you kidding? The Dark Tosser seems to think I'm his number one man at the moment." His voice turned bitter. "After all, I'm the man who killed Albus Dumbledore. No-one would dare touch me." The bitterness disappeared, to be replaced by friendly warmth. "I won't ask where you two are, but I will ask, are you safe?"

"We're okay, Professor." Harry said. "We've managed to complete the second stage of Professor Dumbledore's mission, gathering up other Horcruxes, but we've only managed to grab one of Tom's. The locket. Soon as we get the sword, we'll destroy it."

"As I said, I'll get it to you, somehow." Snape paused for a moment. "Oh, I've changed my Patronus. I think having a werewolf would be a little conspicuous at the moment. It's now... it's now a doe."

"You honour Mrs. Prongs." Hermione said sombrely, smiling at Harry. "I'm sure Miss Tiger-Lily would be proud."

"I hope so..." Snape sighed. "Anyway, enough introspection. Is there anything else you need? I'm hiding in a toilet cubicle at the moment, so I need to be quick."

"No, that's everything. Keep in touch, Professor." Harry said, before ending the call. "So... we follow the silver doe."

Hermione grinned. "Yes... it was terrible when Ron left us. We were both so sad... Yeah, right! We had the best sex ever that night. 11

inches and nineteen orgasms..." She moaned softly to herself in remembrance. "That was so good... for so long, we had to hide our true selves from the gormless prat. When he ran... god, it was brilliant!"

She sobered up slightly. "So, we knew that Snape would be passing the sword to us so we could destroy the Horcruxes. We knew that everyone at Hogwarts would be safe with Professor Snape protecting them. While we were travelling without Ron, we kept up with our studies. After all, we had no plans to stop learning more. After a particularly trying evening of Ancient Runes, I decided to flick back to the book that Albus had left me, *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*. While flicking through, I saw something I hadn't seen before; an odd triangular symbol.

"Harry told me that it was on the necklace that Luna's father was wearing at the Weasley wedding, and that it was Grindelwald's mark. Several questions were raised; why was Xeno wearing that? Why was it in this copy of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*?"

"All good questions." Harry took over. "And we had some answers. Grindelwald's mark was famous for more than Grindelwald, and it was far older than him, too. It was a mark from history. A mark that every Wizarding child had heard of." He could see several people leaning forward, eager to hear more about it. Harry smiled smugly as he disappointed them. "But, I'll leave that part 'til later. After another few weeks of searching, myself and Hermione decided to go to Godric's Hollow. We'd collected the secondary Horcruxes, but it was time for us to 'get back on the road' with defeating Tom."

"It was Christmas Eve when we got there." Hermione said fondly. "We used Polyjuice to turn into a pair of ordinary Muggles, hoping that the anonymity would help us." Hermione sat up slightly straighter in her chair. "For those of you who've read *A History of Magic*, you'll know that Godric's Hollow is one of the small Wizarding hamlets that exist in Muggle areas. Lots of witches and wizards come from there, including Gryffindor himself.

"When we got there, we headed for the graveyard. We saw lots of names we knew. The Abbots, for example. I admit, I froze up when I

saw the grave markers for Kendra and Arianna Dumbledore. I didn't know that they came from Godric's Hollow."

Dumbledore sniffed in his portrait, before reaching into a pocket and drawing out a huge handkerchief. He rubbed his eyes briefly. "Yes," He said after a moment of gathering his wits, "the Dumbledores resided in Godric's Hollow. My mother and sister both died and were buried there."

Harry nodded at Dumbledore before looking back at the audience. "While we were looking for the Potter graves, Hermione spotted that strange triangular symbol on one of the graves. It was marked as a man called 'Ignotus'. We couldn't make out a surname.

"And I found... I found my parents' gravestones. I'll admit, I choked up. I'd never been before. In a way, I didn't want to. Although I was well aware that they were dead, visiting their graves would make it... make it real." He hesitated. "I... I was afraid."

Hermione took over the monologue, letting Harry gather himself. "As we were leaving the graveyard, we noticed someone watching us. They were excellently concealed, but myself and my husband are experts at magical detection. We quickly tracked the interloper down, finding the very woman we wanted to."

"Bathilda Bagshot. The author of A History of Magic, family friend of the Dumbledores, and long-time resident of Godric's Hollow. We followed her back to her house, but she was silent. It was curious. Why was she looking for us, spotting us as Polyjuiced people, and inviting us back to her house?" Harry asked.

"When we got there, both myself and Hermione noticed something curious. The house had a smell to it. A smell both of us were quite familiar with."

"The smell of death." Hermione intoned in a soft voice, sending shivers down several spines. "Something had died in that house... and was beginning to decompose. Neither of us assumed it was Bathilda. After all, she was walking and talking. And our senses were



telling us that the being in front of us was magical." She snorted. "We should have known..."

Harry nodded. "I followed her to another room, where she whispered to me. Since I'm a Parselmouth, I didn't hear any hissing. Because Hermione also shares my gift, she wouldn't have heard anything either. However... Bathilda's head fell off, and a rather large snake poured out of the body. It was Nagini, Voldemort's familiar. She hadn't spoken in front of Hermione, because it's not known that Hermione's a Parselmouth. Based on that, they thought that if Bathilda spoke to me, Hermione would immediately identify it as hissing, and the game would be up."

"We figured out that Nagini had been waiting in Godric's Hollow since the summer, pretending to be Bagshot." Hermione carried on. "Nagini attacked Harry, while sending out a mental distress call. We knew Voldemort was coming, and that retreat was our best option. Sure, the two of us could probably hold our own against him, but with his Horcruxes intact, that wasn't anything we could really do. So, we ran." She winced.

"My faithful holly and phoenix feather wand got destroyed by Nagini." Harry said. "You can't really repair a wand if it's been broken. You can use the core, but once the wood's broken, it's pretty much useless. Our new priority was to locate a suitable holly branch, so that I could be armed. It was way too dangerous to be running round the country without any protection. As soon as I could, I found a holly tree, and used Hermione's wand to sever a branch."

"I whittled it down for Harry," Hermione said, "while he extracted the core from his old wand. We managed to recreate the wand, but it was... well, it was a bit of a lash-up, really. He couldn't use it except in emergencies, since we're both too powerful to use a wand." She reached into her robes, pulling out her own vine wood wand. The tip was blackened and slightly cracked.

Harry followed suit, pulling a pale stick from his pocket. While it was a rudimentary wand, it looked unfinished. Like Hermione's the tip was blackened, as though it had been poked into a fire. "It still works, but it's... unrefined."

Tucking her wand away, Hermione continued the tale. "During the escape from Bagshot's house, I grabbed a book from her coffee table. The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore... by Rita Skeeter."

In her chair, Skeeter flinched, and tried to slither lower.

"It was a fascinating book." Hermione said. "And released remarkably quickly after his death, too. Course, she wouldn't have the courage to print a book like that while Dumbledore was alive. I started reading it, naturally, and was utterly engrossed."

"One of the first sections was about Dumbledore's youth. Not his Hogwarts career, not in-depth, anyway, but his friends when he was younger. Specifically, a man by the name of Gellert Grindelwald."

Gasps filled the audience. Dumbledore was friends with Grindelwald? The Dark wizard he'd defeated in the forties? How? Why?

Dumbledore calmly looked out from his portrait. "Yes, Gellert was my friend when I was a youth. Back then, he was a charming, powerful wizard. Both of us had graduated from our respective schools, and were looking forward to what came next. We were on the precipice of a grand adventure."

"But, the truth or lies about Dumbledore can wait." Harry said. "That'll be one of the things we'll explain later. After the fateful attack by Nagini in Godric's Hollow, we kept moving, eventually ending up in the Forest of Dean. While we were there, we spotted something moving in the snow. Naturally, we were concerned. Was someone following us? Was there something capable of tracking or breaking through Hermione's charms?"

"The 'something' came closer, and we saw that it was a Patronus. A silver doe." Hermione grinned. "Courtesy of Professor... no, Headmaster Severus Snape. It was leading us to a pool in the middle of nowhere. Of course, since Hermione's charms effectively took us out of reality, he had no way of coming to see us in person. He'd left us the Sword of Gryffindor. Unfortunately, it was in the bottom of an icy pond. It was January, after all."

Snape blushed. "I... I admit, I was in a hurry when I left it. I had planned to leave it on the ice, but it fell in. I was being followed by one of the Carrows and had to leave quickly. I sent the Patronus with orders to guide you to the sword, wherever you were. I'd managed to track your communicator to the Forest of Dean, but it's a fairly big place."

"Don't worry about it, Severus." Harry said. "You delivered it, which was the important thing. All I had to do was get the sword out." He sighed. "Unfortunately, the sword has a mind of its own, and wanted to be picked up in a 'worthy' way. Since the hallmark of Gryffindors is their bravery and their 'fools rush in' gesture, I'd have to leap into the frozen pond to collect the damned thing." He sighed again. "I nearly died."

"While I was under water, the Horcrux, which I'd been wearing all the time, decided to start playing silly buggers with me. While I was struggling to get out, the chain of the locket began to tighten on my neck. Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on your point of view, someone else had turned up and pulled me out."

"That someone was Ron Weasley."

Flashback: The Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire  
Saturday, 10th January, 1998

Harry felt his body automatically respond to being submerged in ice water. His metabolism sped up to produce warmth, while his magic began casting low-level heating and drying charms. He didn't look up at his saviour, knowing that only Hermione could really be the one who could find them. He knew she was physically strong enough to pull him out of the pond (some of their more interesting bedroom encounters leapt into the forefront of his mind). However, he got a shock when that saviour spoke.

"Are... you... mental?"

Shit. It was Ron. Somehow, Ron had managed to come back. How the hell did he find us? Oh, the Deluminator, of course! And I'm

outside the protections. Damn it, if he'd passed that to the Death Eaters, I'd be royally fucked now.

"Why didn't you take the Horcrux off before you went in?"

Oh, I don't know... Maybe I was thinking it's been behaving itself and couldn't contract the bloody chain. Harry thought viciously. "Dunno." He grunted, still shivering but no longer in danger of getting pneumonia. "Come on. Let's get back to the tent."

As they walked, Ron glanced at the sword in Harry's hand. "You reckon that's the real one?" He asked.

It is. Harry could feel it. "There's only one way to find out, Ron." He quickly sourced a tree stump, placing the locket onto it.

"Shouldn't I do it?" Ron asked, puffing up his chest slightly. "After all, I got the sword out of the pond."

Harry chuckled. "If you want to try, Ron, I won't stop you." His hand was reluctant to let the sword go, but he managed to pass it across. "I'll tell the locket to open, you stab it, okay?"

Ron nodded, hefting the sword, but Harry could tell he was scared, especially when the locket was pulled out from under Harry's collar.

"What's up?"

"I... that thing's bad for me, Harry." He said. "Maybe it should be you."

"No. You've got the sword." Harry faced the locket. §Open!§ He hissed. The locket opened smoothly with a click. "Stab it." He said calmly, watching the malevolent object scan the two wizards close to it. Naturally, it picked Ron as he had no mental defences, and it could scan his mind easier.

A voice erupted from the Horcrux, smooth, silky and utterly charming. The voice of Voldemort. "I can see your heart, boy. You are my tool, to wield as I will."

Harry rolled his eyes. He'd felt the evil little thing trying to scan him and fail. "Stab it, Ron."

"I see your dreams, I see your fears... you are delicious, boy."

"Stab it, Ron." Harry said, exasperated.

"You know that you are loved least by your family. Your mother, who wanted you to be a daughter. The girl, who prefers your best friend..."

Considering she's my bloody wife, I hope so. Harry thought. "In your own time, Ron."

An image rose from the locket, revealing an image of Harry and Hermione kissing passionately. The image expanded, showing Harry and Hermione caressing, nibbling and loving each other. Harry couldn't help but stare at the image lustfully. I think I'll have to have a brief word with Hermione later... "Stab it, Ron. Now."

Ron snarled as he raised the sword, aiming at Harry instead of the Horcrux.

"Oh, for fuck's sake." He said, raising his wand. "Stupefy." Once Ron was knocked out, Harry took the sword. "Hey, Riddle. Fancy taking me on?"

The locket twitched on the stump. "Who are you, boy?"

"Death." Harry spat as he swung the sword, shattering the locket completely. With a casual flick of his wand, he grabbed the pieces, tucking them into his pocket, before he cast a memory charm at Ron, making the redhead think that he'd destroyed the locket while saving Harry. He also removed the memory of the sword swing at Harry. The task complete, he woke Ron up.

"You okay, man?" Harry asked. "You were blasted back when you destroyed the locket."

"Yeah..." Ron slurred for a moment. "Yeah. What happened?"

"You broke the locket, and there was a magical backlash. You did it, mate. You destroyed the Horcrux." I'm getting really good at lying to Weasleys. Harry noted with amusement. And it's gonna get better when we get back to the tent. Hermione's really gonna beat the shit out of him. He snorted before leading Ron back.

Once back at the tent, Harry dashed inside, managing a quick "Ron's back," before the redhead stepped into the tent. With a roar, Hermione rushed forward, intent on battering Ron to within an inch of his life. She punched, kicked and spat at him, before finally being hauled off by Harry.

"What the bloody hell was that for?" Ron asked, as annoyingly clueless as ever.

"You utter fucktard!" Hermione roared. "You left us! You just ran away! I ran after you and everything! What do you want now?"

"I came back to help." Ron said.

"It's been almost two months, Ron!" Hermione spat. "Why now? Why, after all the danger we've been in, did you come back now?"

"You've been in danger?" Ron shouted back. "I was almost captured by bloody Snatchers! Don't go talking to me about danger! You have no idea what kind of danger I've been in!"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Right..."

"What're 'Snatchers'?" Harry asked.

"Bounty Hunters." Ron replied, still glaring at Hermione. She'd need another dose of Amortentia immediately. He wouldn't tolerate being attacked by his property, hell no! "They go around capturing blood traitors and Muggleborns for cash. Five of them cornered me just after I disappeared."

Both Harry and Hermione snorted at the word 'five'. Each of them could piss all over a mere five witches and wizards. "So, how did you escape?" Hermione asked mockingly.

"I managed to elbow one, grab my wand and escape. I got splinched again, though." He said, holding up a hand with two missing fingernails.

"Ah..." Hermione nodded, still thoroughly pissed with the redhead. "It's okay, then. I'm sorry, Ron. I didn't realise just how much danger you were in. After all, we had to deal with Nagini and Voldemort attacking us, but you were picked on by five people. Sorry. We'll remember that our troubles aren't the same as yours."

Ron nodded, happily accepting her apology and missing the sarcasm completely. "Anyway, I found you 'cause of Dumbledore's Deluminator. I heard your voices on Christmas Day. The Deluminator started glowing, and I just knew where to come."

"Right." Harry nodded, before raising his wand. Somnus! The sleeping spell hit Ron, making him collapse to the floor of the tent.

"Oh, bollocks!" Hermione snapped. "I really wish he hadn't come back. Now we'll have to go back to sleeping in different beds. Can't we just leave him behind? Without the Deluminator?"

"I wish we could. You never know, Hermione, he might come in useful." Even Harry didn't sound convinced. "Even if it's only as cannon fodder."

She snorted. "You got the sword, at least."

"Yeah. It was in a bloody pond, though. Damn thing wanted to make me work for it." Harry passed the sword to Hermione, and pulled the mokeskin bag from his neck. "Now we've got it, and Ron's out of the way, we'd better get these ones destroyed, too."

A half hour later and forty-seven swings of the sword of Gryffindor, the job was complete. Hermione snuggled up to Harry as they sat on an armchair. "I modified his memory. He tried to attack me with the

sword. The Horcrux showed him an image of me and you doing naughty things to each other and he attacked. I knocked him out, destroyed the Horcrux and modified. So, he'll probably start bragging to you about it."

She nodded. "We'd better contact Remus about these 'Snatchers'." She said. "This is information we'll need."

Harry agreed, and raised his watch. "Potter to Lupin."

A whispered "Code Seven!" sounded through the communicator, making Harry mute it. They heard Lupin speaking. "...ingsley. The Taboo almost caught Hestia. I hate to admit it, but we'll have to find a way to send Harry a message, somehow."

Kingsley's deep voice spoke up. "You really think he's still alive, Remus? How do we know he hasn't run off?"

"Harry wouldn't do that, Shack." Remus said firmly. "I know him. He'll be out there, working for the Dark Lord's downfall. But, we have to find some way of telling him that if he says You-Know-Who's real name, it'll trigger the taboo, and he'll be up to his arse in the Death Aurors immediately."

Harry looked at Hermione, who looked a little puzzled, but nodded. "Must be something to do with the Ministry." She whispered.

"I know." Shacklebolt said. "But how? His owl, the only creature that could find him, was killed during the escape from Privet Drive. He must be under some kind of wards since no post owl will take a letter. We can't risk sending people out to find him... I'm at a loss, Remus."

"If I know Harry, he'll find out, Shack. Trust me on this. Harry's a lot smarter than people realise."

"I hope so." Shacklebolt said with a sigh. "I must go." There was a pop, before Remus spoke again. "Harry?"

Unmuting the communicator, Harry smiled. "Hey, Moony. How's things?"



"They could be better, Harry. Things are getting worse here. More and more people are going missing. The Muggleborns have all pretty much been sent to the camps. We're falling behind..." He trailed off. "We're losing this war, Harry."

Hermione slapped her forehead. "How could we have forgotten to tell you, Remus? The Muggleborns are all safe. Umbridge has been sending them to holiday camps in Somerset. They're not in Azkaban, or anything like that."

Remus' sigh of relief was audible. "Thank god. I was wondering about her. I thought she may be under the Imperius."

"No. She gave us the locket Horcrux. She confiscated it from Mundungus. Snape delivered the real Sword of Gryffindor to us, and we've destroyed the locket. We also got the secondary objective completed, too. The only Horcruxes left in Britain are Voldemort's. We're still working on that."

"Are you both safe? I heard that Ron Weasley had left you."

Hermione frowned. "How'd you hear that?"

"He's staying with his brother in Shell Cottage." Remus said.

"Oh... so, while we were fighting for our bloody lives, he was living in a warm house with good food and protection?" Hermione asked. "Bloody marvellous. He seems to think that we should be grateful he's back."

"I have to go, cub. Tonks is getting more and more hormonal. If I'm not home, she starts attacking me with a frying pan."

"Take care, Remus." Harry said. "Don't... don't take any chances. I can't lose you."

"Same to you, cub." And for the first time, Remus verbalised the relationship between the two of them. "I love you, cub. Don't make me attend your funeral. I... I couldn't bear that."

"The same with you, Moony." Harry said, feeling Hermione wrap her arms tighter around him. "Give our love to Tonks."

"Will do. Lupin out."

Hermione rested her head on Harry's shoulder. "So, there's still some fight in the country. We'll have to be careful, Harry. I don't know just how well that tag net can penetrate our defences. I'd rather not find out." She scowled. "Looks like we'll have to do what the cowards do. Say 'You-Know-Who' and 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named'."

"We'll cope." Harry said, snuggling closer to his wife.

Harry scowled at the audience. "Now, that really annoyed me. I'd never feared saying Voldemort before. Now, I had to worry about the Death Aurors coming after us." He sighed. "Anyway, we woke Ron up, and carried on with the mission."

"The day after Ron's 'triumphant return'," the sarcasm in Hermione's voice was plainly evident, "we set off to the Lovegoods' place. The mark of Grindelwald kept appearing. On Xenophilius' chain at the Weasley wedding, in the copy of The Tales of Beedle the Bard, the gravestone in Godric's Hollow... we knew we needed to know more about it. Professor Dumbledore had only covered it briefly during our lessons in sixth year."

"I couldn't reveal more." Dumbledore said. "That is part of the power of the Mark. Only those who seek it can understand it. I knew about it, but was under a sort of taboo of my own."

Harry nodded. "So, since it was the end of the school holidays, and they were longer than ever before, probably Voldemort's minions trying to make it seem that things were better with him in charge instead of Dumbledore, we headed to Ottery St. Catchpole, where the Weasleys and the Lovegoods live.

"When we got there, we found the Lovegood house almost immediately. It was a black tower. Once inside, Xeno let us in, but he

was a bit pissed that 'Undesirable Number One' was knocking at his door." Harry chuckled.

"Once we got inside, we asked Xeno about the mark he was wearing. And Xeno said, 'Are you referring to the sign of the Deathly Hallows?'"

Silence reigned in the Great Hall. Most of the purebloods and half-bloods knew of the old Wizarding fairy tale. The Deathly Hallows were indeed a myth, but even the possibility that they existed...

"During that conversation, Hermione read The Tale of Three Brothers aloud. I'll assume that not everyone knows it, so I'll sum it up. Three brothers try to cross a river. Death appears to them, telling them that they've won a prize for evading him and not drowning. The oldest brother, who's an arrogant prick, asks for the most powerful wand in the world. Death creates a wand from an Elder tree. The middle brother wants to humiliate Death, asks for a way to bring others back to life. So, Death gives him a rock, which he calls the Resurrection stone. The youngest brother, being considerably wiser and more humble, asks for a way to avoid being followed by Death. Death hands over his own Invisibility cloak.

"The three brothers go their own way after completing their journey. The first brother went and picked a fight, using the Elder wand. He won, but was attacked in bed that night and had this throat slit. Death took the first brother. The middle brother used the stone to pull someone from beyond, and that person suffered. Maddened by grief, the middle brother killed himself. Death took two brothers nil. After decades of searching, Death admitted that he couldn't find the youngest brother, until he took off the cloak to pass to his son. When Death found the youngest brother, they departed the world together as equals. Three objects, three Hallows. The Elder Wand, the Resurrection Stone and the Cloak of True Invisibility."

Hermione smirked. "Of course, this is just a fairy tale, right?" The audience was still utterly silent. "So, after Xeno told us about the holders of the original holders of the Hallows. Antioch, Cadmus and... Ignotus. The Peverall brothers. And Ignotus was the name we saw on the grave in Godric's Hollow."

"Of course, the Elder Wand's been described throughout history, occasionally being called something different. 'The Wand of Destiny'. 'The Deathstick'... people have always been looking for it. The only thing all three of these tales confirms is that in order to master the wand, you must defeat the current holder. That's it. The wand then becomes yours." He smirked. "But more on that later."

"While Xeno was cooking dinner, I took a look round the house. My spider-sense was tingling while we were there, but we thought we would be safe because Xeno was printing the truth... until a copy of the Quibbler got spat out from the press, loudly proclaiming me as Undesirable Number One. He'd switched sides."

"We didn't blame him, though." Hermione continued. "Voldemort's Ministry had taken Luna hostage, and was forcing him to capitulate. While he was cooking, he was sending the Ministry a message, telling them we'd turned up. His job was to hold us there until the Death Aurors could come and capture us. We managed to escape by blasting a hole in the floor and disappearing out during the cave-in."

"Had it been anyone by Xeno Lovegood who was holding us, we'd have simply killed him and destroyed the house." Harry said firmly. "But, he hadn't really done anything wrong. He was doing everything he could to save his daughter. We couldn't hurt him."

Hermione sighed. "After we left Ottery St. Catchpole, we were back to the 'move-to-new-area-daily' routine. We did this for months as we were hunting for Horcruxes. As we apparated to each area, we'd do a sweep, looking for the Horcruxes. When we couldn't find anything, we'd move on."

"Ron told us about Potterwatch, a radio program that was hosted by Lee Jordan. It was a pirate broadcast, detailing the things that the Prophet and the Quibbler wouldn't say. We learned that Ted Tonks, Dirk Cresswell and Gornuk had been killed. They were three of the five people we listened in to before Ron ran off. Dean Thomas and Griphook had managed to escape, although we had no idea where they were."

"Then..." Harry paused. "I did something stupid. Utterly stupid. I said Voldemort, not remembering the taboo. Instantly, a group of Snatchers turned up, inside the protections. We didn't have time to recast them. We couldn't disapparate from inside the tent. We were caught." He dropped his head, making Hermione look up at the audience.

"Would you excuse us for a few moments?" She cast a Muffliato, so the audience wouldn't be able to hear their conversation, then turned to her husband. "Harry, please don't do this again."

"I agree, Harry." Dumbledore said softly. "I always told you to speak the name. 'There's nothing to fear in a name', that's what I said. I never realised that he could put a taboo on it. You didn't do anything wrong."

Harry sighed. "I got us caught, Albus. Just by being bloody stupid and speaking before thinking. For years, I'd trained myself to not do that, and in a slip of a tongue, I got us captured."

"You know I don't blame you, Harry." Hermione said. "I haven't forgiven you because there's nothing to forgive! Please, love. Don't do this to yourself. It wasn't your fault. Christ, I nearly did it four times before we got caught."

Harry nodded again.

"Harry." James' portrait cleared his throat. "You know that it was almost impossible to avoid the Death Eaters, don't you? They were everywhere, and with bands of Bounty Hunters trailing all over the countryside, it was inevitable that you'd have to fight. Don't blame yourself."

"I'll be okay." Harry said slowly. "I just... you don't know what they did to Hermione, Dad. You didn't see it... you didn't hear it. Locked in a cell, hearing them torture my wife, and being powerless to do anything..."

James sighed, looking at Lily, who nodded. "Yes, I do."

Harry's head shot up. "You do?"

"Me and Lily were captured in 1979. Held hostage at Malfoy Manor. They did the same thing to us that they did to you. Lily was tortured while I was made to watch. Fortunately, when Voldemort turned up, we managed to escape. I believe that was one of the 'have thrice defied him' parts of the prophecy."

"I understand that you're upset, Harry, but like I didn't blame James, I don't blame you." Lily said softly. "Now, put this self-pity away, and get back to being a hero." She grinned at him, making him chuckle.

"Okay, Mum." He smiled softly at his parents. "Thank you."

"No problem." They replied together.

Harry turned back to Hermione, leaning forward and pressing a chaste kiss to her lips. "And thank you, too."

"No problem." Hermione, squeezing his hand tightly. She dropped the Muffliato, and carried on with the tale. "Sorry about that, folks."

"While the Snatchers were waiting outside the tent, we quickly bundled up everything we'd need. Wands, supplies... all of it went into Harry's moleskin bag, which we then disillusioned. The most important supplies were safe. We accepted that we'd lost the tent. Even my little handbag went into Harry's bag. All the books and clothes were safe."

"Of course, they Snatchers realised that they'd capture Harry Potter and his little 'Mudblood'." Hermione said bitterly. "The Snatchers knew that if they took us to the Ministry, then they'd try and take the credit. The lead Snatcher, Fenrir Greyback, suggested that they take us directly to Voldemort."

"The problem was the Sword of Gryffindor." Harry smoothly continued. "Voldemort wanted the sword. It scared him. The Snatchers had it. We possibly could have escaped the situation, but things were too dangerous. Too much chance of injury. We'd have to go with them and hope an opportunity arose."

"We were taken to Malfoy Manor, where they asked Draco to positively identify us. Bellatrix LeStrange, Narcissa Malfoy's sister, was there, and when she saw the sword, she went bananas. She ordered us taken to the dungeons, where we found Luna Lovegood and Mr. Ollivander... what the hell's his first name, anyway?" Hermione asked.

"No idea." Harry said. "H-Hermione was taken away and questioned..." He closed his eyes. "They tortured her... we could hear her screams..."

Hermione squeezed his hand again. "Harry later told me that while I was being interrogated," she didn't want to say 'tortured', since Harry still felt bloody rotten about that, "Ron was stomping around the cellar, screaming my name. Not looking for a way out, or working on a battle plan. Simply screaming my name. At least Harry was working on a plan of escape. He still had our wands in his bag, along with the other important items. I told Bellatrix that the sword we were carrying was a copy."

"Griphook, the goblin who'd managed to avoid Gronuk's fate, had been captured and was in the basement. I begged him to tell LeStrange that the sword we were captured with was a fake. He was dragged out of the cell to be questioned." Harry said. "Then, a miracle happened; Dobby the House Elf, who we'd last seen at Hogwarts, apparated into the basement. He took Dean, Luna and Ollivander out of the dungeons."

"While we were being entertained by the Malfoys, we found out that Voldemort was out of the country. As it happened, he was in Nurmengard, in Germany. Specifically, the cell of Gellert Grindelwald. He was questioning him about the Elder Wand. Of course, Grindelwald never held the wand, and Voldemort now knew that. After defeating Draco Malfoy and nicking his wand, we escaped and apparated away from Malfoy Manor." Hermione said.

"But... there was a price for our escape." Harry said solemnly. "Dobby was killed by Bellatrix LeStrange as we left." Harry lowered his head

for a moment, silence for a fallen friend. "I dug him a grave, then I went to see Griphook..."

Flashback: Shell Cottage, Ottery St. Standard, Devonshire  
Friday, 3rd April, 1998

Harry entered Griphook's room, Ron and Hermione behind him. She was still weak from her torture, but she was a strong woman, and would soon regain that strength.

Griphook was lying on his bed, clutching the Sword of Gryffindor firmly.

As soon as the trio sat down, Harry's wand, recovered from his mokeskin pouch, flicked, sending the redhead to sleep. "Are you feeling better?" He asked.

"A little." Griphook said. "You buried the elf."

"I did." Harry said. "He was my friend. His species doesn't matter. Never did."

"You're an unusual wizard. You dug the grave."

"I did. Griphook, I'll cut to the chase. We need your help."

"You rescued a goblin." Griphook said, ignoring the comment. "You saved me. Why?"

Harry sighed impatiently. "I don't see why anyone, regardless of species, should be left to the less-than-tender mercies of the Death Eaters."

Griphook nodded. "My help?"

"Yes. We need to break into the LeStrange vault. Voldemort's using Horcruxes. One of them's in there. We need to get it and destroy it."

"Impossible." Griphook said instantly. "Our security-"



"Can be breached." Hermione said, her voice harsh from her earlier screaming. "It's happened before. Back in 1991. Griphook, we know that you're an employee of Gringotts and have your oaths to consider, but we need your help. In order to destroy Voldemort, we'll need that Horcrux."

"What you ask, Harry Potter... is difficult." Griphook said slowly. "You ask that I allow a basic tenant to be breached."

"To save us all." Harry said. "Either way, Griphook, we're gonna be going in. It'll be easier with your help, but we'll go without, if we have to. And we'll be taking the sword with us."

Griphook's eyes narrowed. "I shall consider what you have said, Harry Potter."

Harry and Hermione left the room, leaving Ron snoring on the bed, and headed for Ollivander's room. Inside, the old man looked dreadful. Harry still wasn't in the mood to beat around the bush.

"Mr. Ollivander, is Voldemort looking for the Elder Wand?"

Ollivander blinked in shock, before nodding.

"You told him that our wands share brother cores, didn't you?" He asked, making certain not to sound accusing. "After the incident in the graveyard, he would have wanted to know why. You told him they're brother cores."

"I did." Ollivander said slowly. "I was tortured, Mr. Potter. I had no choice."

"I'm not accusing you, Mr. Ollivander." Harry said kindly. "You've been held by them for nearly a year. I understand that. However, we need some information and assistance."

"Very well."

Harry reached up to his neck, pulling off the mokeskin bag. He drew out Hermione's handbag, passing it across. "Wands. Ours have been

damaged recently." He held out the lash-up he'd made to repair his wand. "As you can see from the blackened tips, both me and Hermione are just too powerful for a conventional wand."

Ollivander took Hermione's vinewood wand, seeing the scoring. "You should have had this replaced with a stave, Miss Granger."

"Mrs. Potter." Hermione corrected gently. "And I know. Unfortunately, by the time the problem became evident, you'd already been captured. We didn't have much of a choice. We've already located suitable replacements for a stave, but we need some help with the prep and creation of them."

Ollivander nodded, grateful for the opportunity of a project. "Good... good. The wands will work for you, such as they are. However, rapid use of high-powered spells will eventually burn out the wand's core. You should only use this sparingly."

While they began the work, drawing out the branches and components that they'd collected, they carried on talking.

"The Elder Wand is real." Ollivander said suddenly, after he'd finished stripping down the two branches of Wych Elm, and grabbed the Box branch. "It is recorded as appearing throughout history. However, it is a unique wand, needing to have it's master beaten. For the most part, simply possessing the wand, regardless of how you managed to obtain it, will allow you to use it."

Harry nodded, putting his ingredients in order on the bed. "That explains how Sirius was able to use Snape's wand back in the Shrieking Shack in third year." He said. "But why do people say that in order to use a wand, you have to defeat the previous owner?"

Ollivander chuckled. "That was started by my great-grandfather, Mr. Potter. It was a rumour designed to prevent wands being stolen. After all, if it was revealed that anyone could use almost any other wand, people would be stealing them all the time. Instead, the Ollivander family began that rumour. It worked, too."

"Oh..." Harry looked at Hermione, who shrugged.

"Now..." Ollivander stood up, holding the four branches, two of Wych Elm, one for each stave, a branch of Box, the second wood for Harry's staff, and a branch of Hornbeam, Hermione's secondary wood. "You picked excellent wood, Mr. Potter. How did you know what was suitable?"

"Bowtruckles live in trees which are wand quality." Hermione said. "We had to fight them for it, but we managed to get the branches. Everything else we've collected on our own."

Ollivander nodded absently as he pawed through the two collections. "Excellent. All of this is indeed wand quality... Although, you wouldn't normally find these ingredients working together. You'll need something to stabilise the reactants."

"Blood." Hermione said. "By using our blood, we'll bind them to us, and each component will then have something in common."

Ollivander nodded. "You are aware that blood cores are frowned up."

"It's not a blood core, though." Hermione pointed out. "It's a binding, which is perfectly acceptable according to Ministry wand-making laws."

"True." Ollivander shrugged. "Now, may I borrow a wand to do the work? I'm afraid my own was taken from me, and I have not been able to procure another one."

Both Harry and Hermione offered their wands. Ollivander took Harry's, since it was 'newer', and more likely to work with him since it didn't have any of the enchantments. He quickly began work...

"So, Mr. Ollivander told us about the Elder Wand, although it was pretty much nothing more than we already knew. It was the only wand in the world that needed to be 'won' in order to work. During that work, I received another vision. Voldemort had found out who last held the Elder Wand, and had managed to obtain it."

Harry looked at the audience, seeing them riveted. "The last master of the Elder Wand... was Albus Dumbledore."

Everyone gasped. Harry looked at Hermione, leaning close. "Doesn't that always seem weird when everyone gasps at once?" He whispered.

"Yep." Hermione whispered back, before clearing her throat. "Voldemort had come to Hogwarts to break into Professor Dumbledore's tomb. Unfortunately, there was nothing Professor Snape could do to stop him. If he even tried, he risked death. So, Voldemort now possessed the Elder Wand... the Wand of Destiny... the Deathstick."

"Even though we knew this, it didn't make a difference to us." Harry said. "We had our mission. We needed to destroy the Horcruxes. That was our priority. After Ron woke up, with a suitable memory modification, of course, and I'd put our staves into the mokeskin bag, Griphook asked to speak with us. He told us that he'd help us break into Gringotts in return for a price."

"He wanted Gryffindor's sword." Hermione said. "He told us that it was actually a Goblin blade that Gryffindor had stolen from Ragnuk the First. Ron was arguing that we should swap the sword of Gryffindor with the fake sword in the vault, or that we should just lie to him. Hermione told him that it was a really bad idea to do so. So, I proposed a compromise; we would allow Griphook to take the sword after we'd used it to destroy the Horcruxes."

"Ron believed that we were going to double-cross him, again, thanks to a memory charm. However, the agreement I made with Griphook was specific; I would hand over the Sword of Gryffindor to the Goblin people when all of the Horcruxes made by Tom Marvolo Riddle, the man who called himself Voldemort, had been destroyed. We shook on it."

Hermione stood up. "Bill, can you stand up?"

In the crowd, Bill Weasley blushed, but climbed to his feet. "Yes, Hermione?"

"Could you please tell us about Goblins? Specifically, regarding Goblin-made objects?" Hermione requested reasonably.

"Well..." Bill's voice went squeaky, so he cleared his throat. "As far as Goblins are concerned, the person who owns a goblin-made piece, such as jewellery, armour or a weapon is the maker, not the purchaser. So, if Goblins made the Sword of Gryffindor, then when Gryffindor died, it should have been returned to them. They consider the price the purchaser pays to be rent until death. The tiara that my Great-Aunt Muriel owns has caused me a few problems at work, because the goblins believe that it is theirs, not Muriel's. They consider wizards who pass a goblin-made object along to their offspring thieves." At Hermione's nod, he sat down.

"So, we were going to break into Gringotts with a being who believed that we were thieves, and who believed that he was rightfully the wielder of the Sword of Gryffindor." Harry sighed. "Still, we need that Horcrux. So we went. We got into Gringotts okay, and down to the vault. Once inside, we managed to find the cup, even though there were dozens of fakes. We knew how to detect Horcruxes." Harry's face turned bitter. "Of course, Griphook lied to us. He stole the Sword and ran, shouting that there were thieves in Gringotts."

Hermione chuckled evilly. "Of course, we were in the shit, but Griphook even more so. That's not really relevant at the moment, but keep it in mind."

"We had to find a way to escape..."

Flashback: LeStrange Family Vault, Lowest Level, Gringotts, Diagon Alley, London  
Thursday, 10th April, 1998

Harry looked around, watching Griphook dart into the crowd of security goblins. There will be a reckoning. He thought viciously. He glanced at Hermione, who nodded. Without a word, Harry stunned Ron, while Hermione transfigured him into a block of wood. They needed their full powers and abilities to get out of the vaults, and Ron

would only be a hindrance. Harry had already summoned their staves from his mokeskin bag, passing Hermione's straight over.

She grinned as she felt the stave almost sing in her hands. "Shall we dance, husband?" She asked.

"Let's be careful, but let's get it done!" Harry snarled. Instantly, a wave of red shot from his wand like a missile, slamming against the lead Goblin and creating an explosion of spell energy. The nearest five goblins collapsed from the stunner, prompting more to fill in the space.

"You cast, I'll shield!" Hermione called out, knowing that Harry was marginally faster at spellcasting than she was.

Spell after spell shot out from the end of Harry's staff, decimating the goblin ranks. He wouldn't kill them (tempting as it was) but he was putting them out of action. They needed the goodwill of the goblins for when everything was complete.

After the tunnel was clear, Hermione lowered the ridiculously-powered Protego. "We're clear for the moment, Harry, but we're gonna have a bloody tough time getting out."

Harry looked around the doorway, spotting the dragon, and got a ridiculous idea. "Hermione..."

"No."

"It's the only way."

"No." Her tone turned pleading. "Harry..."

"Hermione, you know that if we fly the dragon out, we'll have protection from the goblins. It's the only way to get out."

"Fine." She said, resigned. "If I fall and die, I'll blame you. Brooms are one thing, Harry, but a living creature? No, thank you."

"You got Ron safe?" He asked.

"Yes, the little blockhead is safely in my pocket." She said with a grin. It really was an accurate description. Hermione casually waved her staff at the chains holding the dragon in place, while Harry looped one round it's neck in a crude parody of reins, before clambering up onto it's back. Hermione clambered on, and began aiming her staff at the ceiling. "Defodio!" She incanted, the boring spell vaporising a great chunk of rock.

Harry began casting the spell, giving the chains a sharp tuck. The dragon rose, extending it's great leathery wings. Slowly, the dragon took flight, smashing it's way through the rock as it made a break for freedom. A good potion of Gringotts would never be the same, but it didn't matter to Harry and Hermione. They needed to escape, and this was the only real way to get out without having to fight a good portion of the goblin nation.

The dragon escaped, before swooping over London...

"When we were in the countryside, we jumped off the dragon into a lake, restoring Ron on the way down and modifying his memory. The sharp shock of the cold water would be enough to confuse him. So, we had another Horcrux. Let's just recap those, shall we?"

"The Diary of Voldemort." Hermione recited. "The Ring of Marvolo Gaunt. The Locket of Salazar Slytherin. All destroyed. The Cup of Helga Hufflepuff. Captured, but without the sword, which Griphook had stolen, we had no way of destroying it. We were still two missing, so we thought, and then Voldemort himself."

"While we were lying on that little stretch of muddy beach, I got another vision. The goblins had informed Voldemort about our break-in. He was... well, he was about pissing himself in fear, to be honest."

Hermione leaned back. "I could do with a drink." Instantly, Kreacher appeared next to her chair, holding a tray with a large pot of tea and two delicate china mugs. "Kreacher, you really are a marvel, do you know that?"

"Mistress is far too kind to Kreacher." The elf mumbled as he poured the drinks.

"No, I'm not." Hermione said softly. "You do good work, you deserve the appropriate praise. Thank you." After passing across the drinks, Kreacher vanished with the faintest 'pop'.

Harry clinked cups with Hermione, before taking a drink. "He really is excellent." He commented to no-one, before carrying on with the tale. "Now, this is where it starts to get interesting. Voldemort was beginning to become paranoid. A part of his mind was screaming at him to check the Horcruxes, immediately. However, another part of his mind, conveniently the one that was connected to mine, was telling him not to."

"It was a mental battle that my husband was more than up to." Hermione said proudly. "This gave us some time. We had to research a way of destroying Horcruxes without the sword. So, we bought a tent in Muggle Manchester and set it up in a remote part of the Highlands. We still had our full library, and we began to research."

Ron was scowling in the audience. He'd hated that part.

"While me and Ron were researching a suitable magical alternative, Harry was looking at Muggle means. Would hydrochloric acid be enough to destroy a Horcrux? Could we throw them into a nuclear reactor and melt them?" She smirked. "Would we have to make a quest to Mount Doom in Mordor?"

Harry chuckled as he saw the lost looks. "You lot need to read more, you really do."

Skeeter stood up. "I have a question, if I may?"

"You may." Hermione said in a voice of ice.

"Both of you had time-turners, didn't you? Why didn't you use them to escape Gringotts?"



Harry nodded. "That's actually a good question, Rita. Yes, we still had time-turners, but we also had a Ministry of Magic with a country-wide tag net. Any attempt to manipulate time would result in us being up to our arses in Death Aurors before we'd finished spinning the damn thing. We simply couldn't use it. The Ministry's always been able to detect time-turners. Only a specific set of wards, which Hogwarts has, can block their chronometric signature. No, we were grounded in time."

Skeeter nodded and sat down.

"So, more research and book-learning." Hermione said. "We spent two months doing that, and we'd entered July."

"Because of the visions, I became aware of two more Horcruxes; one at Hogwarts and Nagini as the other. So, we had to go to Hogwarts. Nagini would have to be the last one, just before we took on Voldemort himself." Harry said. "We apparated to Hogsmeade, which instantly set off a Caterwauling charm." He wrinkled his nose. "Lovely it was, too. A pair of arms grabbed me and Hermione and hauled us into the Hog's Head tavern."

"Does anyone know who the landlord of the Hog's Head is?" Hermione asked suddenly.

Most of the occupants of the Great Hall shook their heads.

"He was generally known as 'Abe'." Hermione said. "However, that was short for 'Aberforth'... Dumbledore. Albus' brother."

"And a better brother could not be found." Dumbledore's portrait said firmly.

"So, after telling the Death Eaters that it was him who'd set off the Caterwauling charm, he led us back to his chambers..."

Flashback: The Hog's Head Tavern, Hogsmeade, Scotland  
Friday, 3rd July, 1998

Aberforth sat down in an old armchair, leaning back slightly. "Well... Harry Potter has come to Hogsmeade. I hope you know what you're doing, lad. Lot of people want to catch you."

With a practiced flick, Ron was asleep, Hermione tucking her wand back into her robes.

"Yeah, Al said you were lugging around some dead weight." Aberforth said with a small laugh. "I'd have dropped him a while ago."

"It's tempting." Hermione said. "But not yet."

"Okay. What can I do for the legendary Potters?" Abe asked.

"We need to get into Hogwarts."

Abe groaned. "Please tell me he hasn't hidden one of his bloody gizmos in there."

Harry's eyebrow shot up. "Professor Dumbledore told you about them?"

"No." Abe said. "But I'm bloody good at snooping, and Severus is a regular customer of mine."

"Ah." Harry and Hermione nodded, before Harry spoke again. "Yeah, we think one of the last ones is there. Unfortunately, Voldemort knows what we're doing, so time is of the essence. We have to get in, locate it and get out before he can catch us."

Abe sucked air through his teeth. "That's a tall order, lad. Hogwarts has a pair of rather nasty Death Eaters in residence, not to mention all those oh-so-helpful Slytherins who embrace Riddle's philosophy. You're gonna have a hell of a time."

"No choice." Harry said helplessly. "We need the Horcruxes, and this is the only way. We also need a way to destroy them."

"What about that sword?"

"The goblins stole it." Harry replied bitterly. "In the middle of a bloody fight, too."

"Yes, we've heard about your break-out of Gringotts." Abe said with a smile. "That was an interesting episode of Potterwatch. Quite a few people cheering your name during that."

"These are the same people who won't get off their arses and fight." Hermione snapped. "If everyone rose up, the Death Eaters wouldn't have a chance."

"No, they probably wouldn't, but wizards are generally lazy and selfish." Abe said, equally bitterly. "I see it all the time. No, they're waiting for you to do the dirty work, lad and lass, before they come out and show their support." He sighed. "I'm not public, but I'm helping people in Hogwarts. A group of the students have had to go underground, and I'm feeding them. A few medical spells here and there."

Hermione suddenly stood up, heading over to the fireplace. "Is this Arianna?"

Abe looked up, his eyes narrowing slightly. "It is. May I assume you've read Skeeter's bloody book?"

"We have." Hermione said. "But we didn't believe it. We knew Dumbledore. He didn't discuss his sister, but we know that the rubbish Skeeter printed is false."

"Good." Abe said, sounding relieved. "Far too many people have been in my pub bitching and moaning about Albus and Arianna. Nearly attacked a couple of 'em."

Harry leaned forward. "Sir... what happened with Arianna?"

"It's a long story, lad, and not one I want to tell at the moment. Come back and see me when it's all done, I'll buy you a beer and tell you."

Harry nodded. "Good enough, sir."

"Is there anything else you need, apart from Horcruxes and a way to destroy them?" Abe asked.

"Just a way into Hogwarts, sir."

"Not 'sir'." Abe said. "Never 'sir'. Just Abe will do."

"Okay."

Abe reached into a pocket, pulling out a suspiciously familiar coin. "I've just sent for one of the 'undesirables' at Hogwarts. He'll be coming down a secret tunnel from the school. It'll take him a couple minutes." He pointed at the sleeping Ron. "Shouldn't you wake the dead weight up?"

With two flicks of his wand, Harry had woken Ron and given him a memory of an angry confrontation with Aberforth. A section of the wall opened, revealing...

"Neville Franklin Longbottom." Hermione completed smoothly. "He'd been continuing the fight inside Hogwarts, within limits, of course."

"Neville led us into a room inside Hogwarts that we knew very well; the Room of Requirement." Harry said. "We knew that Voldemort was coming. I could feel it in my scar. We had limited time, and we still needed to find that elusive bloody Horcrux. By now, we were convinced it was Ravenclaw's diadem. As we said earlier, we knew that it wasn't the battlestaff, since that had been destroyed, and the security for the battle-bow had never been breached. So, that only left the diadem. And it was somewhere inside this school."

"Once we got into the Room of Requirement, pretty much the whole of Dumbledore's Army, which we established in fifth year, had gathered. Even the alumni of the school turned up. This is when it started. More and more witches and wizards began to trickle in when news of my arrival spread."

Both Harry and Hermione took a few moments to ponder the next thoughts. McGonagall stood up, clearing her throat. At Hermione's nod, she began to speak. "While Harry, Hermione and the dead

weight were toiling their way around the country, myself and the other faculty members were doing our best to protect the students. The Carrows believed that the Cruciatus was an acceptable form of discipline within the school, and even taught the children to cast the hateful thing.

"We'd done our best... but only I, of the faculty, was aware of Severus' true allegiance. We'd discussed many times revealing his secret to the other staff members, but the possibility of the information leaking out was deemed too risky."

"Yes." Snape said. "I was evil and greasy, working tirelessly for Voldemort." He said in a monotone. "I torture old women and eat babies."

"Severus protected these children more than anyone. He'd wipe memories, heal injuries... he was a true hero." McGonagall concluded, sitting down.

Harry smiled at his Granmamma, before speaking. "So, the Order was beginning to assemble for the first time in nearly a year. Dumbledore's Army was gathering for the fight. We knocked out the Carrows and sealed the school. It wouldn't be enough to stop Voldemort, but it was enough to hold him back, giving us precious time to search the school."

"Professor Snape had to run, to make it seem that he was still loyal." Hermione said. "That, and he wanted a crack at Voldemort himself. Professor McGonagall assembled the children into the Great Hall to prepare to evacuate them."

"Some of the people who gathered really did surprise us." Hermione said. "Molly Weasley was arguing with Ginny, telling her that since she was underage, she had to leave. Ginny looked pleadingly at Harry to be allowed to stay, but Harry shook his head. He didn't want her getting in the bloody way."

"Percy Weasley turned up." Harry said, his tone one of wonder. "And that confused me. I honestly thought he'd stand with Voldemort."

There was a gasp in the audience at Percy shot to his feet, his notes flying everywhere. "How dare you?" He snapped angrily.

"Sit down, little man." Harry said in an authoritative voice. Percy sat meekly, trying to gather his notes. No-one helped.

"Remus showed us a picture of his son to try and break the tension." Hermione said. "And little Ripples is gorgeous!" She stood up, grabbing the mirror from it's easel. "Come on, Moony."

Both the adult Lupins vanished as a small baby was held up. Predictably, the women in the audience all went 'aw!' Harry rolled his eyes as Hermione put the mirror back.

Remus reappeared in the mirror. "Yeah... I arrived at Hogwarts, scared, but ready to do my part. Nym was still at her mother's, taking care of little Teddy." He sniggered. "It was funny when Percy apologised to his family. He's never been any bloody good at anything."

"True." Harry nodded. "The people gathered, in preparation for the fight."

"Meanwhile, while Harry was preparing the troops, I snuck off. I had a sudden brain wave. The Sword of Gryffindor was useful because it had been imbued with basilisk venom in the Chamber of Secrets. The same chamber that was beneath the very school we were now stood in. So, I snuck away, with Ron following me like a bloody puppy." She finished with a snarl. "I didn't really want to let him know that I could speak Parseltongue, but time was of the essence. We had a chance here to break the Horcruxes."

"The faculty and the Order quickly began working on a battle plan, while Voldemort managed to access the school's intercom, telling them to give me up and they'd live. Course, half the Slytherins immediately thought that was a great plan. The Hufflepuffs, showing their loyalty, the Ravenclaws, showing their intelligence and the Gryffindors, showing their bravery, stood between me and the Slytherins, giving me the chance to flee from the Great Hall while I looked for that bastard Horcrux."

"Meanwhile, I'd gone down into the Chamber of Secrets, grabbing a basilisk fang. I stabbed the goblet and melted it. The Horcrux was destroyed." Hermione reported proudly. "Unfortunately, Ron got all pissy when I spoke to the sink in the bathroom, so I had to modify his memory, again, so that he thought he'd done it." She snorted. "As if you can learn a magical language like Parseltongue just by listening to a Parselmouth speaking and hissing. Gormless git."

Harry chuckled. "So, we had a fang, venom, and only two Horcruxes left. While Hermione was dealing with the cup, I was looking for the diadem. I spoke to the Grey Lady, the Ravenclaw ghost, who told me that Tom Riddle sought the diadem, and hid it when he came looking for a job in the sixties. He hid it... in the Room of Requirement. I was on my way up there, and saw Tonks."

In the communication mirror, Tonks blushed. "I was an Auror, Harry. I couldn't let my husband, the father of my baby, fight on his own."

Hermione nodded. "I don't blame you, Tonks. I wouldn't let Harry fight without me, either." She squeezed Harry's hand. "Ron then made a comment that he was extremely proud of. He said that we should warn the House Elves so they could escape."

Ron leapt to his feet, mouthing wildly. With a contemptuous flick of her wand, Hermione cancelled the silencing charm. "You kissed me!"

"As if!" Hermione snorted. "Why would I kiss you? At your best moment, you irritate the shit out of me, Ron. Plus, my husband, who's ten times the man you are, was stood right there. No... I'm afraid you were the victim of yet another memory charm." Another flick silenced Ron again, while Arthur pulled him back into his seat.

"While in the Room of Requirement, Draco Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle came in after us. We fought, they lost, but Crabbe had somehow managed to learn how to cast FiendFyre."

Again, the audience gasped, making Harry and Hermione smirk. "Unfortunately, Crabbe didn't know everything. FiendFyre's bloody dangerous stuff if you can't control it. Naturally, he couldn't control it."

So, he'd started a fire that you can't put out inside a room full of burnable objects. One of which we wanted to grab."

"But, FiendFyre is also one of the methods of destroying a Horcrux." Hermione said bossily. "Crabbe, the bloody idiot, had managed to destroy the one of the last Horcruxes. We were winning!"

"It was at that point that we thought Fred had been killed." Harry continued. "He was outside the remnants of the Room of Requirement. Fortunately for the Weasleys, he was only knocked out, not killed. He'd managed to partially shield himself. He was only an inch from death, but he was still hanging in there. I created a Portkey that sent him immediately to St. Mungo's."

He paused for a moment. "We fought our way outside. Voldemort was in the Shrieking Shack with Nagini. The smug little wanker knew that we were after Horcruxes, and we'd need to kill Nagini, but there wasn't any other option. Me and Hermione had to get to the Shrieking Shack..."

Flashback: The grounds of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Saturday, 4th July, 1998

Harry led Hermione and Ron down the passage underneath the Whomping Willow. He knew that this was undoubtedly a trap, but there really wasn't any other option.

He crept to the very end of the tunnel, hearing voices coming from the room above. He held up his hand, making Hermione and Ron stop. Both Harry and Hermione cast silencing charms on themselves, Ron quickly following suit.

"...a problem, Severus." Voldemort's smooth, silky tones filled the air.

"My Lord?" Snape asked.

"Why doesn't the Elder Wand work for me, Severus?"



Harry glanced at Hermione, who nodded slightly, mouthing 'Draco'. Harry nodded back.

"My lord... I have you seen you perform extraordinary magic with that wand."

"No. I am extraordinary, as is my magic. The wand, however, is just a wand. This is no Wand of Destiny. Can you tell me why?"

There was a pause, and when Snape spoke again, Harry could detect the revulsion in his voice. Snape clearly knew that it was his time. "As it happens, Tom, I can."

Another pause, before, "What did you call me?" Voldemort asked in a whisper.

"I called you Tom." Snape replied casually. "We both know that you're going to kill me. I know that I'm not powerful or skilled enough to defeat you, Tom, so I'm gonna go out properly, you silly bastard."

Voldemort's chuckles filled the air. "Such words, Severus... you sound like a Gryffindor."

"I'm something better than a Gryffindor." Snape said proudly. "I'm Dumbledore's man, through and through."

"Dumbledore is dead!" Voldemort roared. "His legacy lies as ashes at my feet! There is none who can stop me!"

"There is one who can, Tom." Snape said, sounding remarkably unconcerned. "Harry Potter, another of Dumbledore's people. I know him, Tom, and I know you. Even with the Elder Wand, you cannot hope to defeat Harry Potter."

Another pause. "You are as delusional as Dumbledore. Do you truly believe that Potter, an underpowered, undertrained child can defeat me?"

"I've been one of the ones helping and training the boy ever since he arrived in the Wizarding world. He's more powerful than you, Tom."

You couldn't possibly hope to beat him. More to the point, you will never understand why you'll lose."

"Ah, yes. Dumbledore's vaunted 'love'. I have won, Severus. Once I kill you, I shall be the master of the Elder Wand, unbeatable in battle."

Now it was Snape's turn to chuckle. "Do you really believe that? You're even more foolish than I thought. You've lost, Tom! Your Horcruxes are destroyed, and a fully-trained wizard and witch are coming for you! You're going to die. I won't be there to see it, I know that, but when I'm in my next great adventure, I shall piss on the tattered remains of your soul with a smile on my face and a song in my heart."

"Then you must die, Severus." Voldemort said, then paused. "For how long have you betrayed me?"

"Oh, since... about 1979." Snape said. "That snippet of prophecy you managed to steal from my mind turned the tables. I knew that you'd try and kill that person. I honestly thought that you'd be good for the country. Overturning the pureblood dogma that ran rampant. Instead, you proved yourself to be a lying, cheating murderer. I have done everything in my power to help bring you down."

"Then die, Severus." §Kill!§

All three of the youths in the tunnel could hear the whoosh of death magic in the air. Harry closed his eyes, mourning for his fallen friend. He heard the 'pop' of apparition and near-leapt into the room. On the floor, Severus was still moving slightly. Since he had been killed by Parselmagic, instead of a standard AK, he was still alive, although dying by inches every second.

His eyes locked on Harry, and his face softened. "Take it..." He gurgled. Out of his right ear, a thick white substance began to flow. Harry gasped as he conjured a large bottle, placing it under the white substance. It took almost a minute to fill the bottle, but the flow tapered off. Harry capped the bottle, casting an unbreakable charm on it and thrusting it into his robes.

"What was that?" Ron asked, looking confused.

"Snape's memories." Harry said softly. "He basically emptied his mind of everything. Everything that Snape knew, remembered and experienced is now in this bottle. His entire life."

Harry had heard of the practice, but never thought he'd live to see it. As part of his Occlumency training, starting all the way back in second year, Harry had learned about memory strands. This had been reinforced when he'd seen Dumbledore using the Pensieve. He'd heard how it was theoretically possible for a wizard to empty their entire memories in a download, but it had never been done. Snape had done it.

"Something else he'll be famous for." Harry said softly, standing up. "Let's go. Need to find that fucking snake."

Harry sighed as he looked out. "Professor Snape... traitor, coward, villain... protector, mentor, guide, hero... friend. He gave me everything that made him who he was. Every memory was preserved. He was dying, and he went out proudly. He stood against the Darkness, and he refused to be broken."

"I did what I always did." Snape said proudly from his portrait. "I stood and fought."

"Severus Snape was a great man." Hermione said. "His accomplishments will live on. We won't allow them to be forgotten or 'interpreted' by the Ministry." She glared at Percy, who was sitting meekly.

"Now, this is where things begin to unravel. After leaving the Shrieking Shack, Voldemort made a loud announcement, stating that I had an hour to give myself up, to save the others. I knew that I'd have to go out there. I didn't have a choice. I headed into the Great Hall, and froze. Lying on the floor were Remus and Tonks. I was devastated..."

"Until we gave him a call." Tonks said. "Remus still had his communicator. During the fighting, I was hit by a bad curse. I was

dying. Remus transfigured some debris into our bodies and Portkeyed me out of there. We ended up here, in the Villa, and he set to work healing me. Did he do a cowardly thing?" She asked rhetorically.

"Again, we'd do the same." Harry said. "If Hermione was dying, I'd Portkey her out to safety, the fight be damned. If you're lucky enough to be married to such an incredible person, nothing else matters. They become your all. I agree with Remus' decision. I thought he was dead for about... two minutes. After that, knowing that my unofficial godfather and unofficial big sister were okay, I felt better.

"However... I knew it was time. If I didn't surrender myself to Voldemort, then he'd attack. And no-one but me could stop him. The Prophecy was coming into play." Harry sat up slightly straighter in his chair. "Hermione came with me on a short walk. She also knew what was needed. Dumbledore had prepared us well. Ever since we began talking about Horcruxes, I knew what had to be done.

"I sought out Neville, knowing that while I was going into the Forest to face Voldemort, someone had to defeat Nagini. Both Hermione and Ron knew about it, but I thought Neville might have a better chance. After all, he was the other potential child of the prophecy."

"But, if I saw that little snake bitch," Hermione snarled, "I'd have 'er! Yes, I knew what Harry had to do. Dumbledore had told him, and we'd discussed it on numerous occasions. Do you have any idea what it's like to know that your husband is walking out to death?"

Harry cleared his throat, getting his emotions under control. "Do you remember I told you all earlier about the snitch I'd been bequeathed in Dumbledore's will? I still had it. Carrying it in my moleskin bag all that time. I knew I'd need it. The inscription, 'I open at the close'?" He sighed. "The item contained within could only be used by someone who wanted to touch death, touch it, but not command it or try and abuse it."

Hermione squeezed his hand again, comforting him. "I walked out with Harry a little way, knowing that he'd have to go a good portion of

the way on his own. But... when you said that..." Hermione's eyes became a little shiny as tears welled up.

"'I open at the close'." Harry quoted. "So, I gave the countersign. I told the snitch..."

Flashback: The grounds of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Saturday, 4th July, 1998

"I am about to die." Harry said to the snitch. Instantly, the walnut-sized ball opened, revealing, as Dumbledore had told him, the fabled Resurrection Stone.

"It's time, Hermione." He said, looking up at his wife.

"I know." She said simply. "I don't want you to go, Harry. What if something goes wrong?"

He smiled gently at her. "Then I'll go to my grave as the luckiest man in the world for having you as my wife, Hermione."

She wrapped him in the tightest hug he'd ever received, putting several greenbreak fractures into his ribs. "I love you, you silly man." She mumbled into his neck.

"I love you too, wife." Harry said into her hair. "I will always love you. It's always been you, Hermione. You know that. If... if I don't make it back, take care of Remus and Tonks for me. Make sure they're safe and protected. Kidnap McGonagall if you have to. I... I couldn't bear to lose anyone else."

"I will. But, you're coming back to me, Harry. I won't accept anything less. If I have to, I'll break into heaven to get you back."

"You would at that." Harry said softly. "I wish there was more time..."

"Never enough time." Hermione whispered bitterly. "Never enough." She fed her arm through his, and began to stroll towards the forest. "You'd better use that thing."

Harry turned the stone over in his hand three times, thinking desperately about the people who meant the most to him. He was disappointed when Dumbledore didn't appear with Sirius, Severus, James and Lily.

"Hello, son." James said.

"Harry!" Hermione said in awe. "I can see them, too!"

"Of course, my dear daughter-in-law." Lily said warmly. "You are two halves of the same soul. Not literally, of course, but the two of you share a connection."

Severus stepped forward, smiling. "Damn, Harry, you've done so well. I'm so very proud of you."

"Me, too." James, Sirius and Lily said quickly.

"I... I wish I had more time to speak with you." Harry said. "But time is limited."

Hermione stopped. "I... I can't go any further, Harry. I have to go back." She hauled his face down for the most intense kiss of their lives. "You come back!" She sobbed, before turning and running towards the castle.

Sirius grinned. "You really did pick a good woman, pup. She's truly exceptional."

Nodding absently, Harry continued walking solemnly. "D-Does it hurt?" He asked, the childish question falling from his lips before he could stop it.

"No, son." All four said together, and Harry realised at that moment, it was true. He had four, possibly five parents. Two of the body, but three of the heart. Severus had been there ever since Harry's first day at Hogwarts, and indeed, ever since a scared-five year old had been visited by dreams. Sirius had stepped up to the plate in third year after escaping from Azkaban, filling the need young Harry

desperately needed. Remus was still around to fill that role, with Tonks giving him the sibling he wanted.

"I... I love you all." Harry said. "I wish we could have had more time together."

"One day, we'll have eternity." James offered. "But, I hope that won't be for a long time yet."

Harry reached the tree-line, taking a deep breath before entering the forest. "Where's Albus?"

"He... he knows something." James said. "I think he's waiting at the crossroads for you, Harry. You will see him, I promise you."

Harry passed through the boundary of Dementors, not even feeling the cold effects from the vile creatures. He passed the sentries, willing himself to not be noticed, his magic making it happen unconsciously. He came upon the camp, seeing the Death Eaters milling around. Voldemort stood by a fire, looking for all the world like a decadent prince, waiting to claim his throne.

"The hour draws to a close." Bellatrix said. "It seems that Potter is not coming, My Lord."

Voldemort didn't look up from the flames. "There is still time, Bella. Maybe his courage is failing. Maybe he's truly afraid of me."

"Maybe you're an arrogant wanker with delusions of adequacy." Harry said, dropping the Resurrection Stone on the floor. Since he now wanted to be noticed, the subtle notice-me-not charm faded.

The Death Eaters all roared, grabbing their wands as they suddenly noticed Harry. On the far side of the clearing, tied to a tree was Hagrid, who began roaring at Harry, telling him to run.

"Stop, Hagrid." Harry said serenely, before turning back to Voldemort. "We both know why I'm here, Tom. Kill me, but leave the others alone."

Voldemort looked up, clutching the Deathstick. "I'm afraid that won't be possible, Harry. You see, they have dared to stand against me, and for that, they must be exterminated like the vermin they are." He snorted as he raised his wand. "The 'Boy-Who-Lived'... no more."

With a flash of green, Harry died.

He opened his eyes, seeing a never-ending expanse of white. He could hear nothing but the comforting thump of a heartbeat. He was warm, and comfortable. It was perfect.

It was wrong. He sat up, getting to his feet. Christ, I hope this worked. He looked around, searching for anything that could be of use to him. Glancing down, he noticed he was naked. Rolling his eyes, he imagined creating a set of robes on the floor in front of him. They appeared, instantly. Pulling them on, Harry heard a whimper. A few feet (feet? Inches? Miles? Light years? What was distance in death?) was a pathetic, huddling figure.

Instantly, Harry knew what this was, and felt no sympathy.

"Harry James Potter." A voice called as the whiteness began to coalesce into colours.

Without pause, Harry threw himself forwards, wrapping Albus Dumbledore into the tightest hug he could manage. "Grandpappy Firebird!" He proclaimed, crying into Dumbledore's beard.

"You wonderful young man, you." Dumbledore said, wrapping his arms around Harry. "I knew that you had the power, Harry. I knew it."

Harry stood for a moment (hours? Days? Who knew?) hugging Dumbledore, sharing his feelings about the old man. Finally, he pulled back sniffing and rubbing his eyes. "Hi, sir." He said brightly.

Dumbledore chuckled. "It's good to see you, Harry. I honestly hoped this wasn't necessary."



Shaking his head, Harry held up his hand. "We both knew it was, Professor. We knew that I'd have to die to remove that bloody Horcrux."

"No-one should be asked to sacrifice themselves, Harry." Dumbledore said as he sat down on a bench. Around them, the colours had turned into a perfect replica of King's Cross station. Harry sat down next to him.

"Sir, ever since we had the conversation about Horcruxes in my sixth year, we knew that I was one. We knew that I was carrying a piece of that utter bastard's soul. And we knew that Voldemort killing me was the only way to remove it."

"Still..."

"Sir, if you'd hidden this from me, or tried to manipulate me into it, I'd have been pissed at you." Harry said firmly. "Now stop it. You didn't ask me to die. You told me that it was the only possible chance. And now..." He looked over his shoulder at the huddling figure. "That's the Horcrux, isn't it?"

"Yes." Dumbledore said, glaring at the figure. "Tom fears death more than anything. Even that small fragment of his soul is terrified. It doesn't know what to do. It doesn't know how to process anything in this realm. You and I, Harry, not fearing death, truly have nothing to worry about."

"Oh. Cool." Harry nodded. "I have questions, sir. Things, odd things have happened since you passed on."

Dumbledore nodded. "Your wand. Yes, I was watching."

"You can see the living?"

"Of course, my boy, of course." Dumbledore nodded. "When you left Privet Drive, your wand was able to act on it's own, something that no-one has ever heard of. Fortunately, the afterlife contains a wide multitude of people. I was able to ask a few people and beings some questions, and have managed to find the answer."

"Do tell, sir."

"The being I spoke to gave his name simply as 'Adam'. He's a phoenix. Or rather, he was the very first phoenix."

Harry whistled through his teeth.

"Quite." Dumbledore agreed with a smile. "As you are aware, phoenixes are immortal. However, they understand the true burden of immortality, and they occasionally choose to pass on. As Adam did. He told me about the wands."

"So, what was it?"

"The statement that Ollivander makes about 'the wand chooses the wizard' is accurate, to a degree, but it's not really a consciousness that chooses. The magic of the wand, which is partly from the core, but also an infusion from the maker. Indeed, it's because of this very phenomenon that Muggles created the phrase 'a hand-made gift is much more personal'. We each put a little of ourselves into an item we make with our own two hands. Those two magicks combined in a wand.

"Now, when you and Voldemort duelled in the Little Hangleton graveyards, the stakes were more than either you or Voldemort realised. You were fighting for your life, true, but you were also fighting for dominance in the wands. Because of your truly impressive power, your cast-iron will and your utter love for your wife, family and friends, the core of your wand was able to dominate the core of Voldemort's wand. Whenever they would battle, your wand would make Voldemort's wand submit. Since the core of a wand is infused with a wizard's magic whenever they cast a spell, your wand was able to fight Voldemort, even though he wasn't using the brother wand."

Harry blinked. "So... because of that one incident, my wand was forever able to defeat Voldemort?"

"In a word, yes. Your wand knew that Voldemort's magic would be submissive to it."

"Huh..." That explains things rather neatly. Harry thought. "Okay... How exactly am I gonna wake up, though, sir? I mean... as of now, I'm dead."

"Not dead, Harry." Dumbledore said quickly. "But not living. You are stood on the edge of a cliff. You can either jump off, or step back. The choice is yours, my boy. However, I know you, and I know that you will go back to Hermione."

"Damn straight." Harry replied, equally quickly. "Someone still needs to give Tom a good killing, and it'll be me."

Dumbledore nodded. "There is something else you wish to ask of me, Harry."

"Yeah." Harry sighed. "The Deathly Hallows."

"Ah." Dumbledore leaned back on the bench, stroking his beard thoughtfully. "Yes. I thought you'd want to know about that."

Harry sighed. "You told me about the Hallows. I didn't know that other people knew about them, though."

"It's an old legend, Harry. Most people treat it as they would the revelations in a copy of the Quibbler. Fanciful tales. But the Hallows would provide a second layer of protection for you, should you need them."

"Sir... I don't know about the Hallows. I don't think they should be allowed to exist. Is there anyway I can destroy them?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes. And in an amusing twist of irony, the items must die. Melt the stone in FiendFyre. Throw the wand through the Veil. Without them, the Cloak of True Invisibility will be just a cloak, but an eternal cloak. It is the only safe Hallow, Harry."

"I understand." Harry nodded.

"I will admit to a moment of weakness, Harry. I tried to use the Resurrection stone, to see my sister and my mother. I wanted to see them, just one more time before I passed on. I couldn't do it. I knew the lure of the Deathly Hallows. I was the master of the wand, I had the Resurrection stone... and had access to the final one, your cloak. I could have become the Master of Death. And that thought terrified me."

"You wouldn't have gone over, Albus." Harry said comfortingly. "You're the most decent man I've ever met. You would have stood, and you would have fought."

"I thank you, Harry, but I can't believe you. The lure..." He shook his head. "The only reason I was able to tame the wand was because of my desire. I would not kill, and I would not boast. The wand, like the Flamels all those years ago, was looking forward to Death. Had I died, undefeated, the wand would have become just a wand. No more 'Deathstick'. Unfortunately, I was defeated by Draco Malfoy, and the wand passed."

Harry nodded, then blinked. "Hang on a sec..."

"Yes, Harry. You defeated the Master of the Elder Wand. You possess the Resurrection Stone and the Cloak of True Invisibility. You're the Master of Death. You have both layers of protection."

With a groan, Harry leaned back. "It's too much."

"I understand. You're one of only two people I would truly trust with such power, Harry. The other is your wife. I give you one final mission; destroy the Hallows, Harry."

Harry nodded. "We did what you asked. I collected most of Voldemort's Horcruxes. There's only one left now. Nagini. Ron, Neville and Hermione all know that she must die before Voldemort goes. We also found every other Horcrux in Britain. They're gone, too."

Dumbledore shook his head. "My boy, you are, without a doubt, the most exceptional young man I've ever met. I'm proud to have known you, and truly honoured that you allowed me into your life."

"It's time, isn't it?" Harry asked, standing up, extending a hand to help Dumbledore to his feet. "I have to go back."

"I'll see you again, Harry." Dumbledore said, wrapping Harry into a hug. "But not for a long time, I think."

"I look forward to it, Grandpappy Firebird." Harry said, making Dumbledore smile. "I think one of things I'll do when I get back is write the real story of your life. Put some fact about you out there. Thinking that you killed Arianna..."

Dumbledore nodded. "Thank you. Aberforth will be able to tell you the tale. Tell him that I'm sorry I couldn't do more for him."

"I will, sir." Harry said, standing back and closing his eyes. "Just one more thing, sir... is this real, or is it happening inside my head?"

"My dear boy!" Dumbledore said. "Why can't it be both?"

With a grin, Harry soared upwards, heading back to his body and battle.

Harry felt his consciousness reconnect with his body. He took a quick inventory, not daring to move a muscle. He could almost feel the people stood around him, watching with awe.

"My lord..." Bella was saying relevant.

"Enough!" Voldemort snapped. "Is the boy dead? Someone check him?"

A moment later, a figure was stood over Harry, jabbing two fingers into his carotid artery. "Is Draco alive?" Narcissa Malfoy hissed.

"Yes." Harry whispered back, not knowing whether that was still true.

Narcissa pulled her fingers away. "The brat is dead, my lord."

Harry could feel Voldemort smiled. "The 'Boy-Who-Lived' is no more, dead by my hand!" He levitated Harry into the air, waving him around like a rag doll in a dog's mouth. "You, oaf... pick the boy up. You shall carry him back to Hogwarts, proof of my victory."

Harry was picked up tenderly by a pair of immensely strong arms, and he knew that Hagrid was carrying him back. He could hear Hagrid crying openly as he was being lifted, but he didn't dare reveal himself. It was too soon.

The walk back to Hogwarts was one of the longest that Harry had ever experienced. He heard Voldemort use a Sonorous charm.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are!" He sing-songed, sounding eerily like Luna Lovegood. "Defenders of Hogwarts, your time has come. You are outnumbered, bloodied, and the 'Boy-Who-Lived' is no more. Come out and surrender. Kneel to me and I shall wash your sins away. Resist... and I shall exterminate you all."

Harry heard the large main door of the castle open, the rustle of cloth, footfalls on the stone floor. He heard Minerva McGonagall scream out 'No!', sounding utterly heartbroken. He wanted to send her a signal, something to let her know that he still lived, but he didn't dare. Not yet. It didn't feel right.

"Drop the boy at my feet, oaf." Voldemort command. "Let him lay among the mud where he belongs."

Harry was placed gently on the ground, and allow his body to slump convincingly.

"Now you see the truth. Even the 'Boy-Who-Lived' could not stand up to my might. Do you see now where your still little resistance has gotten you?"

The sound of a single pair of footfalls, nearly inaudible on the grass, made Harry tilt his head infinitesimally.

"You're a coward and a bully!" Hermione screamed at Voldemort. "You lie about everything."

Another figure stepped next to Hermione, closing the distance to Voldemort. "You're going to pay... Riddle."

"And who is either brave enough or stupid enough to call me by that filthy name?" Voldemort asked silkily.

"It's Neville Longbottom." Bella crowed. "The son of the Aurors I sent to St. Mungo's."

"A pureblood." Voldemort said approvingly. "It's not too late for you, Longbottom. You still have the chance to join the Death Eaters."

"I'd rather die." Neville said bluntly.

"That, too, can be arranged." Voldemort said, raising his wand. "But before I do send you to your death like a coward, I think you might like to see this." A quick summoning charm brought the Sorting Hat soaring from the Headmaster's office.

However, before Voldemort could catch it, Neville reached up, his eyes glowing a deep red, as he snatched the hat out of the air and thrust his arm in. "You cannot stand against us, Tom." Neville intoned, his voice having three distinct tones, all familiar to McGonagall. She glanced at Hermione, who's eyes were locked on Neville, her lips moving in sync with him, then at Harry, who's mouth was moving, barely. She swallowed back a shout of pleasure as she watched the drama unfold.

"You have not won, and you do not have the power you think." Neville pulled the Sword of Gryffindor from the hat, the blade choosing to come to a worthy Gryffindor who needed it. The fact that it was Harry and Hermione working through Neville tilted the decision. With a single smooth stroke, Neville removed Nagini's head, leaping backward as blood spurted.

Silence reigned. Voldemort stood in shock, staring at Neville, who's eyes had faded back to their normal brown. He was looking at the

sword in awe. Voldemort's musing was cut short when a pair of boots slammed into his chest, knocking him back onto his arse. With fear and horror, he watched the body of Harry Potter vanish with a pop, only to reappear next to the Mudblood.

Hermione stood next to her husband, knowing that this was not the time to rape his mouth. That time would be soon. She watched in pride as Harry tugged on the bottom of his jumper, straightening it as he looked at Voldemort. He tilted his head from side to side, making grim cracking noises.

"Rumours of my death..." Harry stated, smiling at Voldemort. He looked at Hermione, sharing a warm, private smile, before he looked at the crowd of people behind him. "Are you guys ready?"

"Ready!" The crowd roared, pulling their wands.

Harry summoned his stave, Hermione matching his movements. "Let's be careful... but let's get it done!" He threw the first curse, a drastically overpowered Reducto curse that blasted Lucius Malfoy thirty feet backwards. Acting as though Harry's curse was a starting pistol, every person began firing curses.

The battle quickly changed into confusion as both Order, student and Death Eater charged forward. Harry and Hermione lost sight of Voldemort for a moment as a wave of black overcame them. The battle moved into the school itself, the Centaurs launching themselves from the forest as they joined the battle. Everywhere Harry looked, he saw his friends fighting.

Harry ran into the Great Hall, hearing Voldemort casting Killing Curse after Killing Curse. He casually ducked an AK, smirking as it hit a Death Eater. He watched as Yaxley was triple-teamed by Fred, George and Lee Jordan. Hagrid picked up Walden McNair, snapped his neck and threw him into the wall. Ron and Neville were casting a vicious-looking Silver Dart curse on Fenrir Greyback, ending the werewolf forever.

Narcissa Malfoy was tearing through the battle, looking for her lost son. Harry was tempted to kill the bitch, but he had bigger fish to fry.



Besides, he kinda liked the idea of prim, proper pureblood princess Narcissa Malfoy clanging a tin cup against the bars of Azkaban. Shaking his head, he looked for a target.

Bellatrix LeStrange was cackling madly as she managed to kill a sixth-year Hufflepuff, smirking as the girl fell. She turned, looking for another target, spotting a familiar little redhead witch...

"Not my daughter, you mad bitch!" Molly Weasley roared, flicking her wand madly and knocking the madwoman down. She stalked forward, projecting an air of hatred and power that made even Voldemort himself pause. Molly proceeded to take Bellatrix apart piece by piece. People came up to Molly, trying to help, only to be knocked aside. "She's mine!" Molly snapped, aiming to kill her opponent.

Voldemort himself was battling McGonagall, Slughorn and Shackbolt, and holding his own. Harry knew that Voldemort had to be the one he'd fight. He stepped forward, not noticing the smaller duels stopping as he passed. Molly and Bellatrix were both too mad to bother stopping, each intent on destroying the other.

"Oh, Thomas!" Harry sing-songed. "Don't you think it's time?"

"What are you doing, Harry?" Shackbolt panted. "This is not the time for a hero!"

"No." Harry said. "Not a hero. A single man, doing what he must. After all... prophecy calls for it, doesn't it, Tom."

"You know of the prophecy, Potter?" Voldemort asked, moving into a defensive stance. "I was given to understand... of course. Severus was your man, not mine. No wonder he never reported that you knew it."

"There was no point. But, in the interest of fairness, I'll tell you. 'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies.' That's me, in case you didn't understand. 'The Dark Lord will mark him as his equal,' that's this funky scar, 'but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not', and I do know it, and you don't, 'and either

must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives..." Harry smiled coldly. "You ready to die, Tom?"

Voldemort took a step back. "It doesn't say you'll win, boy. Only that one of us will die."

"True." Harry said. "Very true. But, I've decided that it'll be you who dies, Tom. You've spent nearly twenty years trying to fuck up my life, and I've had enough of it."

With a smirk, Voldemort stepped forward. "I don't think so, boy. I think you're afraid, even now. Tell me, which of your friends will you sacrifice this time?"

"I won't. I give you this chance. Remorse, Tom. It's the only thing that will save you from damnation."

"I feel no remorse." He smirked. "I have the wand, Potter. I cannot be beaten."

Harry shook his head. "You're wrong. You have the wand, yes. But you are not it's master." Harry gave a cold smile. "I am."

"Impossible!" Voldemort screamed. "Snape killed Dumbledore. I killed Snape. I am the master!"

"Nope." Harry said jauntily. "Draco Malfoy was the master. He disarmed Dumbledore. I disarmed Malfoy." Harry stopped as he heard Molly Weasley scream out a curse. All through the conversation, the two had been fighting, and now...

"Diffindo!" Molly screamed, a bright silver curse neatly severing Bellatrix's head.

"Fuck this." Harry said, raising his staff. Instead of muttering a spell, he allowed a blast of his magic to erupt, forming the same golden flames that had saved him when he and Hagrid were fleeing Privet Drive.

Voldemort tried to fight, sending "Avada Kedavra!" at Harry, but Harry was too strong, too fast, too good to be beaten. The Elder Wand recognised it's true master, flying from Voldemort's hand into Harry's.

The instant the golden flames hit Voldemort, it was over. The flames were pure, and burnt away anything in Riddle that wasn't natural. His mangled soul, a crime against nature, was destroyed. The magicks powering his body were dissipated, leaving it to collapse back to the floor. It was over.

Harry glanced around the hall, watching people stare at him with shock and horror. "I'm sorry about this." Harry said, raising the Elder Wand. "But it's for 'the greater good'." A memory charm erupted from the wand, lashing out across the whole of the Hogwarts' grounds. He had such control with the wand that he managed to spare Hermione and McGonagall from the spell, but everyone else fell victim to it. No-one would ever remember anything about the Hallows.

Harry sighed as he completed the story of the battle. "And that was it. Voldemort was defeated and dead."

Hermione snuggled as close as she could, considering they were in separate chairs, and rested her head on her husband's shoulder. "A big fight. Death, life... All amazing stuff. But, there was still more we had to do."

(1) I refuse to accept that Hedwig dies such an ignoble death. She lives. SHE LIVES!

(2a-2b) Quoted directly from Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows. I don't own it (apart from the copy I bought at Asda for a fiver, which I consider a tremendous waste of money), never have, never will. I know I said this in the disclaimer, but I just thought I'd remind you all.

## – EPILOGUE –

### Tying Up Loose Ends

The Great Hall, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry  
Saturday, 1st August, 1998

Harry stood up, turning round as he adjusted his trousers. Sitting in an armchair for a long period of time made your underwear cut into places he really didn't want to discuss. "So... does anyone have any questions?"

Nearly every person thrust up a hand, several of them shouting questions.

"Silence!" Dumbledore bellowed again, making the people in the hall settle instantly. "I still love doing that." He said smugly, winking at Harry and Hermione.

"Actually," Hermione said, standing up, grabbing the notebook and heading back to the podium. The chairs vanished silently. "there is something. Percy Weasley said he was writing up a list of charges against us. I think we should get those out of the way, really."

Percy stood up, flicking his wand to duplicate the notes twice. Walking to the front of the hall, he passed a copy to Minister Shacklebolt, another copy to Hermione at the podium and retreated back to his seat. She quickly flicked through the pages of notes.

"Impressive, Percy." She said after a moment, passing the notes across to Harry. "Have you ever considered a career as a fiction writer?"

Percy blushed. "Those are all valid charges. The Ministry will have no choice but to act."

Kingsley stood up, mounting the stage in two strides. "Actually, I don't think we will." He said, staring imperiously at Harry. He quickly took a pen from Hermione scribbling through the notes. "You can't charge them for anything that Dumbledore cast at the Dursleys... The

conversation about pureblood bigotry is also irrelevant..." He looked up. "Are you serious? You want to bring Harry and Hermione Potter up on charges because they didn't register their marriage?" He glanced at the notes. "Sorry, let me rephrase that; you want to have the marriage dissolved because it wasn't approved by the Ministry?"

"Yes." Percy said stiffly.

Hermione flicked the notebook, showing something to Kingsley. "Marriage certificate. That's fine." Kingsley said, scribbling out another line. "Let's see... slander of the Weasleys, no, it's not slander if you present it as an opinion..." He kept scribbling. "False academic records, that was Dumbledore, so no... The Portkeys in the watches was also Dumbledore..."

Another page was shown to Shacklebolt. "He got exemptions?" Nodding, Kingsley kept scribbling. "They were working under tutors, so they didn't break the Restriction on Underage Sorcery..." More scribbles. "Statute of Secrecy wasn't breached. The Grangers knew about the existence of the magical world."

Percy stood up. "These are all valid charges. You are showing bias and favouritism, Minister."

"No, I'm showing a knowledge of the law, Weasley." Shacklebolt said in a no-nonsense tone. "I was an Auror. I know what is and isn't legal." He looked down at the parchment, before looking up. "You want the Potters arrested because they own invisibility cloaks?"

"Yes."

"No." Shacklebolt said, scribbling it out. "They aren't restricted, Weasley. Frowned upon, yes, but not illegal." He kept perusing the list. "Actually, this is one thing that's potentially incriminating." Shacklebolt said to Harry, pointing to one of the items. With a grin, Harry leaned over to Hermione, whispering. She smirked and turned a couple of pages in the book, showing it to Shacklebolt.

"How the hell did you get Ron Weasley to agree to being memory charmed?" He asked in wonder.

“Dumbledore.” Harry said. “He told Ron, got him to agree to and sign it, then Obliviated him. We were also authorised, along with Severus and Minerva to perform any and all memory charms on Ron.”

In the audience, Molly turned to her son and glared. Ron shrank back, not knowing what to do.

“Huh...” Kingsley quickly went through the list, scribbling long and fast. “That’s about half these silly charges removed at once. What about the Time-Turners?”

Another page in the notebook. “Damn... you really were prepared, weren’t you?”

“Excuse me, Minister.” Percy said, standing up again.

“Family licenses.” Shacklebolt said, not bothering to look up. “There were two time-turners in the family vaults, and passes for them. Whoever held the pass could use the Time-Turner. The Potters had the passes, so it’s legal.” More scribbling. Reading another entry, he looked up. “This is ridiculous, Weasley. Learning Occlumency isn’t illegal. Legilimency, yes, but not Occlumency. In fact...” Shacklebolt tore up the parchments, snatching the copies from Hermione’s hand and ripping them, then summoning the final copy from Percy. It, too, became confetti. “As the Minister for Magic, I declare the Potters free of any criminal charges, since they haven’t actually committed any.” He nodded at the pair, before jumping off the stage and sitting down.

Hermione smirked at Percy. “Bad luck, Weatherby. Maybe next time.” She looked at the crowd. “So, any relevant questions?”

“Actually, I have one.” A voice called up from the back. Neville Longbottom stood up, looking every inch the tall, proud warrior that he was. “It’s about Professor Lupin.”

“Oh?” Remus replied from the mirror.

“Yeah... where were you during the first twelve years of Harry’s life?” He asked, with no malice in his voice. “Why weren’t you there when he was growing up?”

“A good question, Mr. Longbottom.” Remus said with a sigh. “In very basic terms, the Ministry is the cause of that. The Minister at the time, Millicent Bagnold, told me that I, as a ‘dangerous dark creature’ was not to go anywhere near the Saviour of the Wizarding World. So much so that she ordered a ward set up around Privet Drive that prevented any werewolves, in human or wolf form, from approaching within ten miles.”

“That’s barbaric!” Neville snapped.

“It gets better.” Remus said bitterly. “A second ward was put on me, so that I couldn’t write to Harry. Not by Muggle mail or by owl post. I was not allowed to use a telephone at all.” He sighed again. “Then, when Harry started at Hogwarts, I asked the Ministry if I could contact him. Again, I was told no. They didn’t want the bad press of Harry Potter associating with evil. Fortunately, the ward was broken at the end of his third year by accepting me as I am. However, only he could break that particular set of spells by approaching me first.”

Neville nodded, pondering. “Why couldn’t one of the other teachers tell Harry about you, then let him contact you? That would get round the restriction, wouldn’t it?”

Dumbledore’s portrait heaved a great sigh. “Again, Bagnold bespelled us to not promote that course of action. During the meetings we each had with Harry, we told him about his parents and his parents’ friends, but we couldn’t give any information about their ultimate fates.”

“How could the Ministry get away with just bespelling you all?” Neville asked.

“Several areas of government routinely use the technique to prevent state secrets being passed out. The Muggle world uses confidentiality agreements, the penalty for breaking one being imprisonment. The Wizarding world simply makes certain that you can’t break it. Everything to do with Harry became a state secret, other than the

meaningless information that was printed in the biographies. We simply couldn't tell him." Dumbledore concluded.

"Another reason for me to distrust the Ministry." Harry said sharply. "They robbed me of an uncle while I was growing up." His eyes swivelled towards Percy, who was back to squirming in his seat. "That, I am not prepared to forgive."

"Fortunately, Remus is safe and in a secure location." Hermione said smoothly. "Along with his wife. Andromeda has been notified, and is probably on her way there as we speak."

"Next question?" Harry said, looking out into the crowd, spotting the blonde hair of Rita Skeeter bouncing as she squirmed in her seat. "Yes, Skeeter?"

With a blush, Rita spoke up. "I was wondering about the Horcrux that Miss Ginny Weasley was using during her first year. From what you said, it was a plain diary, bought from a Muggle stationer in London."

Hermione was a tiny bit impressed; Skeeter really had been listening. "That's correct. However, the purpose of that Horcrux wasn't his survival. At least, not completely. It was also ego. He wanted the real record of his deeds recorded, and he also wanted the opportunity to do it again. He left the diary in the hands of one of his most trusted lieutenants, Lucius Malfoy."

"For what purpose?" Rita asked.

"As we said, that Horcrux was ego. Riddle was thrilled that he'd managed to pull one over on Dumbledore, and left the diary as a way of showing off. Later on, when he learned more about Horcruxes, he learned that it was a limited process, and couldn't be undone. Apparently, he was livid when he found out Lucius had slipped it to Ginny Weasley and that it had been destroyed."

"May I ask another question?" Skeeter asked politely.

"Suppose." Harry grunted.



“You’ve actually listed seven Horcruxes.” Rita checked her notes. “The diary, the locket, the ring, the cup, the diadem, Nagini and Harry. I thought there were only supposed to be six.”

Harry nodded, impressed. “Yes. The reason was simple; Voldemort wanted six Horcruxes. Nagini was going to be number six back in 1981. However, when his killing curse rebounded, the piece of soul he’d removed was sucked into me and he fled. When he was re-embodied back in ’95, he thought he was one short, so he made Nagini into a Horcrux then. He only ever had six in existence at any moment. By the time he turned Nagini into a Horcrux, I’d destroyed the diary in the Chamber of Secrets.”

Rita nodded and sat down. A voice from the back of the Hall shouted a question that almost everyone wanted answering. “What’s the truth about Arianna Dumbledore?” Hermione squinted and saw Aberforth Dumbledore stood there, nodding slightly. He’d told them the tale after they’d left Hogwarts after defeating Voldemort.

With a sigh, Harry leaned on the podium. “That’s a personal tale, and I think we need Albus’-”

“It’s fine.” Dumbledore’s portrait interrupted warily. “Go ahead. It’s better that they know, simply so they’ll leave it alone.”

Hermione continued. “In the chapter of Rita’s book called ‘The Greater Good’, it stated that Dumbledore was planning to go on a Grand Tour, apparently a rite of passage in those days. After completing Hogwarts, the graduate would go and gain experience, before choosing their career. Albus and his friend Elphias Doge were staying in the Leaky Cauldron, when a letter arrived, informing Albus that Kendra had passed on. In the book, it insinuates that Kendra’s health was a fabrication.”

“My mother had cancer. At least, that’s what they call it these days. Back then, it was described as a tumour. It was in her brain, and it was incurable.” Dumbledore spoke up. “She knew the end was coming. Unfortunately, we didn’t know when that end would come. She slipped on a wet floor and banged her head, which caused the tumour to rupture. She died, almost instantly.”

"In the book," Hermione said, "Albus immediately returned to Godric's Hollow, where Aberforth, his brother, was staying. And Arianna. His sister."

Dumbledore said nothing.

"Since Albus was the eldest, he became the Head of House Dumbledore. According to 'The Greater Good', Aberforth was always running rampant throughout Godric's Hollow, causing trouble and strife."

"Which was, frankly, bollocks." Dumbledore said firmly. "My brother was a good man. Always has been, always will be."

Hermione chuckled, before sobering. "Now, according to the book, Albus wasn't back in Godric's Hollow to care for his sister, but to continue her imprisonment. People were asking questions like; 'Arianna Dumbledore? Never heard of her. Who's she?' and 'Why do we never see her?' Which were good questions, if bloody nosy.

"Now, myself and Harry have spoken to Albus about this when we received his portrait, and also to Aberforth." Hermione said. "We know the truth and have, with their permission, been allowed to reveal this to you. So please, don't leap to conclusions. Wait until you hear everything before you judge him.

"The chapter stated that whenever anyone asked about Arianna, the Dumbledores would reply that she was 'frail' and 'delicate'. And it's true; she was. However, they didn't want to come out and tell people exactly why. It was something that people wouldn't understand.

"After Albus returned to Godric's Hollow, Grindelwald was expelled from Durmstrang, and returned to his great-Aunt, Bathilda Bagshot. Bagshot introduced Albus to Gellert, and the two boys, both incredibly bright and magically gifted, became great friends. Why shouldn't they? Gellert never revealed that he'd been expelled from Durmstrang. Instead, he was just that charming nephew of Bathilda's.

“One thing from that chapter...” Hermione trailed off as Harry reached into his attaché case, pulling out a shrunken book, which he rapidly re-expanded, flicked open to the right page, and passed to Hermione. Her eyes scanned the text for a moment, searching for the letter. “Right.

“Before I go any further, I’d like to ask Professor Dumbledore a personal question.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Sir?”

“Ask away, Mrs. Potter.”

“What happened to your father?”

“Ah.” Dumbledore nodded slowly. “My father, Percival Dumbledore, was a pureblood. More importantly, he later developed blood purity issues. As I stated earlier, my mother was a Muggleborn, and later on, he began to be repulsed by her. He was caught Muggle-hunting and was arrested. To my knowledge, he died in Azkaban.” He saw the odd looks. “I have never believed in Muggle-hunting. To me, is it barbarism, and I will not tolerate it. As far as I was concerned, my father was dead the instant I found out about it. Mother was nearly broken by finding out she was married to a monster.”

Hermione nodded. “So, a Dumbledore was a blood-head. People speculated that the younger Dumbledores would also inherit that trait. They didn’t.” She developed a half-smile. “I remember once overhearing Draco Malfoy complaining about Dumbledore being the champion of Muggle-Lovers and Mudbloods. Apart from the crude language, it was pretty much accurate. So, Albus was the champion.” She held up the book. “Then Rita told us about this letter.

“Gellert, your point about Wizard dominance being for the Muggles’ own good, this, I think, is the crucial point. Yes, we have been given power and yes, that power gives us the right to rule, but it also gives us responsibilities over the ruled. We must stress this point, it will be the foundation stone upon which we build. Where we are opposed, as we surely will be, this must be the basis of all our counterarguments. We seize control for the greater good. And from this it follows that where we meet resistance, we must use only the force that is necessary and no more. This was your mistake at Durmstrang! But I

do not complain, because if you had not been expelled, we would never have met!” Hermione looked at Skeeter. “Do you still maintain that this letter is genuine?”

Skeeter nodded unconsciously. “That was the information I received from Bathilda Bagshot.”

“Of course.” Hermione nodded. “You’re a failure as an investigative journalist because you don’t research anything enough. You were given a piece of parchment and ran with it. You didn’t check to see if it was Dumbledore’s handwriting, you didn’t check with Grindelwald to see if it was true or not... No, you just made an assumption and printed it.”

Harry cleared his throat. He’d been silent for quite a while, considering that interrupting Hermione during a conversation about books was a sure-fire way of getting a punch in the mummy-daddy button. Ron could attest to that from personal experience. “Grindelwald and Dumbledore had only been friends for two months when a tragedy of unparalleled proportions happened.” He kept silently, placing a hand on Hermione’s arm discretely.

“My sister died.” Dumbledore said quietly. “Arianna... the best of us...”

“How?” A voice shouted from the audience.

Dumbledore looked up, tears in his eyes. “Why don’t you ask Rita Skeeter?” He said bitterly. “She seems to know everything.”

Skeeter sank lower in her chair, staring at her shoes intently.

“Well, since Rita’s not telling the truth, I shall have to.” Dumbledore said, not bothering to wipe the tear stains from his cheeks. “Approximately ten years ago, the Muggles released a film called ‘Rain Man’, in which they explore an illness called autism. It’s... it’s a curious affliction.”

Hermione leaned forward. “I shall give a brief explanation. Autism is basically a mental condition. An autistic person, depending on the severity of the illness, has social interaction difficulties. In the most

extreme cases, they aren't able to communicate with anyone. They are effectively trapped in their own head. Now, Arianna wasn't that severe, but she had learning difficulties that couldn't be overcome. She was a witch, yes, but she could never be trained. Quite simply, her brain wouldn't be capable of processing it."

"However," Harry continued, "Arianna could read perfectly well, and she had an eidetic memory. Every fact she was exposed to was permanently stored in her brain. She could recite every book she'd read, word for word. She was brilliant at math, which meant that she could design spells using Arithmancy. She could design ward schemes, but could never implement them. She never learned how to focus her magic into a wand.

"She wasn't a squib, but she wasn't physically capable of being a witch, and wasn't capable of living by herself. She had no idea how to cook, clean, bathe or even dress herself. The reason the Dumbledores hid the existence of Arianna was very simple."

"She couldn't relate to anyone." Albus' portrait spoke up. "If a stranger came to the house and tried to speak to Arianna, she would scream herself hoarse. Strangers terrified her beyond belief. She had her own little world set up, and anything that disrupted that little world was treated with fear and loathing. As such, my mother volunteered to stay with Arianna at all times, since Arianna knew her and trusted her. Since we knew that mother wouldn't be alive too much longer, myself and Aberforth spent more and more time back at home, allowing Kendra to assimilate us into her world."

People were fascinated. The rumours and speculation had been running rampant for over a year about what happened with the Lost Dumbledore. To hear it being so... well, normal wasn't exactly the word, but it was certainly understandable. The respect for Dumbledore, which had dropped to records lows, began to climb.

Hermione nodded. "Arianna was delicate. We know that. It was her death that led to Dumbledore becoming the champion. Grindelwald came to see Albus at their home in Godric's Hollow. When Albus realised that Grindelwald was a pureblood fanatic, they began to duel.

Aberforth was there and he began to help his brother. Arianna was one of the very first victims of Gellert Grindelwald.

“Both Aberforth and Albus were horrified and terrified. Their little sister, their defenceless little sister, had been killed by a man they called friend. Grindelwald fled that night, retreating to Germany, where he got involved with the Socialists, and became the primary magical advisor to Hitler. He kept launching sneak attacks on Albus, though, and eventually managed to kill his wife and children. It was that action that made Dumbledore confront Grindelwald, capturing him and sentencing him to life in prison in Nurmengard. Grindelwald’s motto was ‘the greater good’. In a twist of irony, Dumbledore had that logo put on the gates of the prison.”

Harry looked about the hall. “Any more questions about that? Or can we leave the private life of the Dumbledores private?”

“How do you know this?” Rita asked.

“They told us.” Harry said shortly.

“I have a question.” Minerva said. “I’ve not seen you since you left the Great Hall after the final battle. How did you manage to get hold of the portraits?”

Harry smiled. “The portraits of my parents and Sirius were at Gringotts. They were painted just before their deaths. Sirius kept copying his memories into a Pensieve, so that his portrait could be updated. I found those at Grimmauld Place when we went there after the wedding.”

“What about the Headmaster portraits?”

“Copies.” Hermione said. “Specially ordered copies, for our exclusive use. They arrived in the mail from the artists directly.”

“Do you remember us telling you about Severus passing me his entire collection of memories?” Harry asked suddenly. He didn’t wait for a response. “We put those memories directly into the portrait. As such, it remembers everything. Same for Padfoot’s. Professor

Dumbledore had a percentage of his memories extracted, but he thought he'd have more time. It contains the more recent memories, but the rest is just the portrait. Same for my parents."

"What happened at Gringotts?" Arthur asked. "Considering that the last we heard of your tale, they were trying to kill you..."

Harry smirked. "Funny story..."

Flashback: Gringotts Bank, Diagon Alley, London  
Monday, 20th July, 1998

The instant Harry and Hermione Potter stepped into Gringotts, a large number of armed guards approached, brandishing their weapons. Harry rolled his eyes, putting his hands up. "I seek an audience with Master Ragnok, under Convention 15 of the Shadow Proclamation."

The goblins stood still, holding their weapons, while a single goblin ran down a corridor. Almost ten minutes later, a snappily dressed goblin stepped forward. "I am Master Ragnok. You have a lot of nerve showing your face in Gringotts, Harry Potter."

"Yes, I do." Harry said. "However, you have a lot of nerve attempting to attack me. I bring one of your staff up on charges of being an oath-breaker."

The goblins hissed, bringing their weapons to bear. Ragnok raised his hand, stopping the guards, before he stepped closer. "Speak quickly, human."

"Griphook, after we rescued him from the Malfoy dungeons, agreed to work with us. We made an agreement; he would help us break into Gringotts to remove a Horcrux, and we would give him the Sword of Gryffindor after we'd destroyed all of Voldemort's Horcruxes. As soon as we got into the vault, Griphook ran, taking the sword with him. He broke our oath."

Ragnok nodded slowly. "I see. Griphook!" The last word was a roar, calling Griphook to come and explain. The instant he turned up, the two began speaking quickly in Gobbledygook.

Almost two minutes of constant chatter later, Ragnok backhanded Griphook viciously. "Kill him." He snapped. The guards lunged forward, a truly impressive number of blades stabbing into Griphook. With a sigh, Ragnok turned to Harry.

"We have failed you as a people, Harry Potter. We made a deal with you, and we broke it."

"You did." Harry said mercilessly.

"What do you require of us?"

"My money will be removed from this institution." Harry said firmly. "You have proven to be incapable of protecting my interests."

"You can't do that!" Ragnok snapped. "You will remove almost two millions galleons in liquid assets, not to mention priceless antiques."

"Yes." Harry said. "As I stated, you cannot be trusted."

Ragnok snarled. "You push your luck, wizard!"

"Not really." Harry said, smiling smugly at the goblin. "Suppose I was to mention, just in passing to a few of my friends, what the goblins have done? How long will it take for every witch and wizard to remove their gold from Gringotts? How can you be bankers when you don't have any money?"

With another snarl, Ragnok nodded. "Very well. We will allow you access to your vaults to remove the contents. What else?"

"The Sword of Gryffindor is to remain the property of Hogwarts. I know your customs regarding treasures, and you're wrong. If an item is purchased, then it belongs to that person. If they choose to pass it on, they shall."



“Accepted for the sword.” Ragnok said grudgingly. “We will see with regards to other items.”

Harry shrugged. He had no intention of buying anything from the goblins again. “Those are my requests at this time. However, I submit that the goblin nation as a whole owes me a life-debt. If I hadn’t killed Voldemort, he would have had your entire race exterminated.”

Gnashing his teeth, Ragnok nodded. “Very well. We owe you a boon.”

“You do. I have nothing else to request at the present time, but I will call on you if I need anything.”

Harry conjured a pair of large multi-compartment trunks. “Come on, Hermione. Let’s go and clean out the Potter vaults.”

“Gringotts isn’t the only bank in the magical world.” Harry said. “The Swiss have a really good setup in Zurich. We now bank there.”

Harry realised that he’d just told people the goblins were untrustworthy, but he didn’t really care. It was the goblins’ own damn fault for betraying him in the first place.

“What about the Mudblood’s parents?” An anonymous voice called up. Hermione’s wand flashed, casting a Levicorpus on the speaker. Blaise Zabini rose into the air, dangling by his ankle.

“I’m sorry.” Harry said in a voice of mock-sweetness. “I must have misheard you. I believe you called my wife a ‘Mudblood’? Considering I said at the beginning that anyone who speaks badly of my wife will face my wrath, I must conclude that you’re truly stupid, Zabini. More to the point, you don’t exactly learn, do you? I heard the comments you made earlier, you know.”

Kingsley, knowing that this would quickly get out of hand, clicked his fingers at the Aurors sat near the back. They rushed forward, trying to grab Blaise, but Hermione released the spell, letting him fall head-first onto the floor. Fortunately, he wasn’t high-up enough to cause serious injury, but he’d be out cold for a while, and have a horrendous

headache for days. "Aurors, that man is to spend the next seven days in a holding cell for racial abuse. No medical treatment, prisoner rations."

A Portkey was placed on the unconscious Zabini, whisking him away.

"Thank you, Minister." Hermione said sweetly. "Perhaps it would be a good idea for all racial slurs to receive the same treatment."

"I'll see what I can do." Shacklebolt said noncommittally.

"We already told you." Hermione said. "My parents... are safe and sound, back at home and under a Fidelius. They were never attacked, and they enjoyed the year in Australia, but they're glad to be home. Next question?"

Skeeter stood up, glancing at her notes. "Two other things, if I could." She waited for a nod. "You mentioned several times the name of 'Peverell'. From what I understand, they're an extinct family. How do they relate to this tale?"

"Ah, the heart of the matter." Harry said. "In basic terms, the three brothers of the tale are the Peverells. They were the first wielders of the Deathly Hallows. Antioch, the first master of the Elder Wand, Cadmus, the possessor of the Resurrection Stone, and Ignotus, the man who held the cloak. The Hallows are ancient, predating almost anything. The Potters were descendants of Ignotus, and thus held the Cloak of True Invisibility. The Gaunts, who were also the Heirs of Slytherin, were the last descendants of Cadmus Peverell. Antioch never had children, since the silly bugger got himself killed before he could."

"Are you the Master of Death?" Rita asked, making everyone stop and stare. Even the portraits were silent.

Harry nodded gravely. "I am not just the Master of Death, Miss Skeeter. I'm the Last Master of Death. I have carried out Dumbledore's last task. I have forever destroyed the Deathly Hallows."

“What?” Percy leapt to his feet. “How dare you? Those items should have been presented to the Department of Mysteries for study!”

“As the Master of Death,” Harry said in an icy tone, “all three items were, either by inheritance for the cloak from my father, a gift of the stone from Dumbledore and defeating Draco Malfoy for wand, mine. I was the true owner, and could thus determine their fate. Besides, it was necessary. The Elder Wand is gone. The stone melted and destroyed. The power of the Hallows is no more.”

“Lord Potter.” Shacklebolt stood up, eyeing Percy Weasley warily. “As the Minister for Magic, I am making a binding proclamation; you can not be charged for any actions that you have taken in the last seven years. You are free and clear. No Ministry member will ever be able to prosecute you.” A wave of magic erupted from Shacklebolt, ‘sealing the deal’.

“Cheers, Shack.” Harry said appreciatively. He eyed the hall. “So, now you know the truth about my life. Pretty much all of it. There is, however, one last piece of business for us to complete.” He eyed the Weasleys. “Ginevra Weasley, I am invoking the life-debt between us. You will never approach either myself or my wife again. You will make no attempt to dose us with a love potion, nor will you request or permit another to do so on your behalf. You will not attempt to communicate with us in any way. Ever. Am I clear?”

Ginny’s mouth flapped. “But, Harry... You know I love you.” She said, eyeing Hermione balefully. “You know that you were with me.”

Above the Potters’ heads, the floating message, ‘You only ‘know’ what we wanted you to believe’ flashed for the last time, before dissipating. “I was never with you, Ginny. By the time you were convinced we were dating, I was already married to the woman I’d spent almost five years with. There was never anything between us, except in your mind.”

“No, you’re wrong!” Ginny said tearfully.

“Enough!” Harry snapped. “I have given my terms. If you fail to obey these terms, the life-debt will be breached, and you will die.” Not

giving her a chance to argue, he sealed the debt. "As I speak, so mote it be!" For a moment, Ginny flashed as her magic accepted the oath for her, making her sit down meekly.

Harry nodded at her, then turned to Ron. "Ronald Weasley, I am invoking the life-debt between us. You will never approach either myself or my wife again. You will make no attempt to dose us with a love potion, nor will you request or permit another to do so on your behalf. You will not attempt to communicate with us in any way. Ever. As I speak, so mote it be!"

Ron flashed as his magic acknowledge the vow. He glared hatefully at Harry, convinced that he'd taken everything from him. Molly pulled him down, not wanting her precious baby boy to breach the oath.

"Arthur Weasley, I am invoking the life-debt between us." Harry said.

Arthur stood, shaking his head. "There is no need, Harry. I'll do whatever you need of me."

"Control your family." Hermione said, then paused. "Actually..." She leaned up to whisper into Harry's ear. He nodded, blinked, then his eyes shot open. Hermione nodded again, then turned to Arthur. "Mr. Weasley, perhaps you should visit St. Mungo's. I just remembered something Mrs. Weasley was telling me in the Leaky Cauldron, back in the summer before my third year. She was telling me and Ginny about a love potion she made when she was younger."

Poppy Pomfrey, who'd been sat with the other faculty, shot up to her feet, near-running across the hall. Her wand flashed expertly as she checked him out. She sighed, and closed her eyes. "I'm sorry, Arthur." She said tenderly. "You test positive... and it's become self-sustaining."

Arthur sagged in his chair. How much of his life was a lie? He didn't notice the Aurors coming to arrest his wife, nor her kicking, screaming and struggling. He didn't notice Ron and Ginny glaring at the Potters, but unable to say anything. He didn't notice Bill, Charlie, Fred and George each wearing identical expressions of shock.

"If there's anything we can do, Mr. Weasley." Harry offered from the stage.

Looking up, a broken man, Arthur nodded gratefully.

Harry glanced at the elder Weasley sons. "I think you'll understand why I won't be marrying your little Princess Ginnykins." They each nodded.

"What are your future plans?" Rita called out, once the action had died down.

"We're going on holiday." Hermione said. "Go and see Remus and Tonks. Be little Teddy's godparents. Spend some time on ourselves. The world will have to get along without us for the time being."

"We've had enough trouble for a lifetime." Harry said, smiling at the crowd.

Daily Prophet – Monday, 31st August, 1998

The World We Live In

By: Rita Skeeter

My dear readers, have you ever had an epiphany? A revelation that leaves you breathless? It makes you question everything you've done in your life, and you realise that you were lacking.

Today, less than a month after the shocking announcements by the Potters at Hogwarts School, the world has changed. I know now that I was lacking.

In my bestseller book, *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*, I ran with lies and speculation. I didn't care who I hurt. I tarnished the memory of a good man. A great man. I admit I am under no compulsion to write this article, except my own shame and a magical oath to tell the truth. In my many years reporting for the Daily Prophet, I have taken great delight in slandering, ridiculing and generally destroying the people I wrote about. If I hadn't done that, things would be so much different. The world would have been aware of the return

of Lord Voldemort over a year earlier, which could have saved countless lives.

Things have changed in the last month. Interim-Minister Kingsley Shacklebolt has been confirmed as Minister of Magic, and has reprogrammed the magical tag net of Britain to locate every Death Eater. Each of them has been given a hearing with Veritaserum, and appropriate sentence passed.

The following individuals were found guilty of war crimes, and have been sentenced to execution by being passed through the Veil of Death:

Lucius Malfoy, Draco Malfoy, Vincent Crabbe Senior, Vincent Crabbe Junior, Alonzo Goyle, Gregory Goyle, Amycus Carrow, Alecto Carrow, Rastaban LeStrange, Rudolphus LeStrange, Augustus Rockwood, Pius Thicknesse, Gordon Yaxley, Antonin Dolohov and more than sixty other Death Eaters.

Only a few were given the status of 'redeemable', chief among these Narcissa Malfoy, who was sentenced to fifty years in Azkaban prison for her actions in support of Voldemort.

Orders of Merlin, first class, were presented to Remus John Lupin, Nymphadora Lupin, Neville Franklin Longbottom, posthumously to Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, posthumously to Severus Tobias Snape, and finally, of course, to Harry James and Hermione Jane Potter.

Orders of Merlin, second class, were presented to every other member of the fabled Order of the Phoenix and the student organisation known as 'Dumbledore's Army'.

The Daily Prophet wishes Lord and Lady Potter all the best as they enjoy their first proper holiday and time together as husband and wife.

Daily Prophet – Tuesday, 15th September, 1998

Destruction of a Pureblood Family?

By: Penelope Clearwater

Today, shock raced throughout the Wizarding World as Arthur Weasley, patriarch of the Ancient Clan of Weasley, separated from his wife of thirty years. During the revelations at Hogwarts School six weeks ago, it was announced that Arthur Weasley has been subjected to Amortentia for nearly 35 years, ever since he was in

Hogwarts himself. Utilising a love potion to marry a wizard is highly illegal, and results in prison time at Azkaban. Molly Weasley was then convicted of thirty years in prison, one year for every year of marriage under the potion.

Ronald Bilius and Ginevra Molly were both disowned from the family after it was announced that they had been following in their mother's footsteps, continually attempt to dose Lord and Lady Potter with Amortentia during their mission to rid the world of Lord Voldemort. Neither has returned to Hogwarts to continue their education.

William Weasley has moved to France to spend time with his wife Fleur and prepare for the arrival of their new baby.

Charles Weasley has returned to Romania, taking up a position as Deputy Chief of the Romanian Dragon Preserve.

Frederick and George Weasley have been in negotiations with Lord and Lady Potter regarding the continued operation of Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes. More to come on this story as it happens.

Percival Weasley, the only Weasley son to work for the Ministry, was dismissed from his position by Delores Jane Umbridge after he unveiled plans to reinstitute the Muggleborn Registration Act, for real this time. The proposal had been modified to include those of mixed parentage. Although it wasn't specified in the Act, it was clear that this was an attempt to discredit and remove Lord Harry James Potter from Wizarding society.

Madam Umbridge was quoted as saying, "There has been enough of this foolishness in the Ministry. We stand for all magical beings, half-blood, pureblood, Muggleborn and those others that aren't human. If you possess magic, you deserve the protection of this Ministry, and this sort of racist action will no longer be tolerated here."

Undisclosed Location

Date: Unknown

"Harry?"

"Hmm?"

"Make love to me, Harry." She rolled over to face her husband. "Let's get to work on baby number one, shall we?"

“My pleasure, love. My pleasure.”

As Harry began to make love to his wife, a wave of satisfaction overcame him. All was well. Finally, Harry thought as he pleased his wife, the world knows the Real Us.